Alex Kitnick talks to Tom Burr about closets, community, and Le Corbusier.

ALEX KITNICK
Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation in Firminy (1965) is one of five Unités built in response to housing shortages after World War II. Conceived of as collective units, the Unités were imagined as vertical cities with streets in the air. By the early 1990s the Firminy Unité had fallen into a state of disrepair. Half of the building was inhabited, and the other half had been completely cordoned off. Around that time, artists began exploring the site and in 1993 there was an exhibition there—“Project Unité.” How did that exhibition come about?

AK
What inspired your work in the exhibition, The Storage Project (1993)?

TOM BURR
“Project Unité” was organized by a curator named Yves Aupetitallot, but it was the brainchild of the Swiss artist Christian Philipp Müller. Christian was looking at the work of Le Corbusier, rethinking the relationship between architecture, modernism, and the public. Aupetitallot and Müller invited about 40 artists to make work there. We took over an entire floor of the abandoned part of the structure.

TB
There was a strong discord between the occupied and empty parts of the building. Le Corbusier considered everything to be part of a certain kind of gestalt of architecture—he designed the furniture, the storage spaces. Everything was meant to be of a whole. If you didn’t live in accordance with that kind of architectural organization, things spilled out beyond the borders of the space. That was visibly evident in Firminy.

Residents were using small balcony spaces for storage. It made me think about the actuality of lives lived in these particular spaces. I created a history of storage spaces, progressing from portable units and extending to built-in units, all constructed out of MDF. These pieces interacted with the existing architecture through their positioning. Some of the pieces were portable—nightstands, for instance. Other pieces started to enclose parts of the architecture, becoming continuous with the apartment. Some of them were tailored and tamed by the existing architecture. Others exceeded the dimensions and the parameters of Le Corbusier’s design.

I wanted to play with and push Le Corbusier’s modular system. For instance, my measurements were not based on or compatible with Le Corbusier’s system, so while the MDF units and additions were the only occupants of the space, besides the visitors, they also appeared as negations and obstructions within the space. The MDF created an appearance of blankness, and the shifting of scale slightly altered the equilibrium of the apartment’s design. The nightstands were small and scattered throughout, blocking the usual passage between the rooms, while other larger closet units felt oversized and imposing.

What interested me most were the balconies—the loggias, as they’re called. Residents had expelled bicycles, clothing racks, and other household objects from the apartments onto the loggias. What was supposed to be a leisure area became a very pragmatic, utilitarian

From mobile to immobile and back

A scattered, partial history of domestic storage units could inscribe its way from the realm of furniture and discreet objects, and the age of the cabinetmaker, up to a providing of architecturally based solutions, the built-in closet and storage system. The latter is included within the logic of the architectural scheme, to greater or less degrees, while the earlier furniture examples, the oak chest, the castan, the wardrobe, etc., were traditional, portable units which made their way from location to location. The furniture solution did not give way to the more architecturally based method of storage, but rather the various solutions have been employed to accommodate the different architectural, economic, and stylistic environments they are meant to serve. One could also examine such developments from the perspective of the emergence of a modernist agenda, where it becomes not so much a matter of furniture versus architecture, but of an attempted dissolution of these categories. Built-in units extend from the design of architectural surroundings creating an integrated environment, theoretically eliminating the need for future furniture choice or further interior design.

Privacy

In a recent “occupants survey” of (U.S.) low and middle income housing projects, two issues were cited as being fundamental factors in determining a tenant’s satisfaction with their given living space. Both of these factors were grouped together in the development of a single issue: privacy. The first of these, insulation and sound-proofing between the apartments, was discussed primarily in relation to the outside, with concerns expressed both about hearing sounds from other apartments, and of being heard themselves by the adjacent apartments.

The second factor, regarding the storage space available within each apartment, began to indicate a concern with privacy within each apartment unit of multiple occupants, and suggested the need to view the issue of privacy vis-a-vis the accumulation of objects, and the storage of these objects out of view of the other occupants. It was generally maintained that there was inadequate storage space available in the apartments under study, leading within these terms, to a lack of sufficient privacy.

Gordon Matta Clark

(In the Firminy project), through the over-articulation of the storage situation, by means of structural changes, (built-in closets and cabinets which adhere to, but which fail miserably in their attempts to produce a congruous effect within the given architecture), the storage problem becomes positive space, temporarily removed from its status as hidden.

It is foregrounded within the apartment, as opposed to being concealed within it, and structured as open, and empty, rather than concealing objects and personal effects. In this sense, both the structural units are exposed, and the space of their potential content revealed. The units are viewed in their various attempts to be seen as contingent with, and ultimately (ideally) invisible within, the existing architecture of the apartment.

The structures may be seen as sculptural and architectural intrusions into the pre-orchestrated scheme of the dwelling unit, not on the original plan, and cutting into the original
plan in much the same manner as an average accumulation of goods disrupts the architectural integrity of a given (realized) blueprint. The accumulation of goods can locate itself with a degree of awkwardness, and embarrassment against a modernist backdrop.

Glass houses

Some spaces employ glass cabinet doors to the storage units, and particularly cabinets for china, silver, and glass have this feature, and the function necessarily shifts to one of display. Glass houses, seen from this perspective, become large china cabinets, while at the same time they must wrestle with their own internal problem of storage. All solutions must gravitate towards the center, the opaque core of the structure, or function as discreet room dividers, as in Philip Johnson’s New Canaan house, while all objects of decor, and personal effects, must, if it appears, be chosen with exposability in mind. Restructuring one of the loggias into an open closet, with a glass facade, only rearticulates the possible function this space may have for many residents of such an apartment. The chance to take in the view and get some air may have to double up with that of storage. Stepping back from Unité d’Habitation, and glancing up proves this to be the case in several instances. Restructuring the loggia in this manner also proposes the paradoxical logic of the closet, located along the axis of conceal/reveal, and produces this as one possible view from the apartment.

Storage problems

Discussion concerning closets and closet space, from both professional and layman’s circles, generally evokes the dual notion of storage problems, and storage solutions, which are articulated in terms of order and disorder, economy and excess, etc. There is a concern, perpetual in nature, that accumulation will lead to excess, and excess will erode the careful order established within the storage unit itself, and the idea of the closet in general. A solution, then, is only temporary at best, as accumulation and excess tend to threaten the closet nature of the closet, or storage unit, pushing at its boundaries. Of course, accumulation and excess also ensure its existence, and guarantee its structure. The desire to store the accumulation of goods and personal effects, out of view, while at the same time concealing or disguising that storage system itself, structures the entire floorplan of a particular space, producing spaces under, over and behind other architectural givens. Often the most ingenious solutions are those which attract as little attention to their existence as possible.

Walk-in closets

There are, of course, closets which one can walk into. In an urban context these spaces take on the distinction of “luxury”, as they accommodate the occupant with more than what has been determined by the minimum amount of storage space, and provide the experience of entering into one’s accumulation of goods and personal effects. They also seem to provide the very essence of privacy, much like the other walk-in closet, the wc, where one feels beyond the space of display to others, and where one might entertain a secret. (It is common practice, in
the privat enviroment of particular companies and corporations to closley monitor the comings and goings, and conversations held within the employee restrooms; long considered a safe zone for disclosure of material which could not exist except as a secret outside of those walls, attention is now paid to this area of the building’s floorplan. A similar dynamic has long existed in the public realm. (In the Firminy project), through a positioning of the structures, the walk in closets are focal points within the spaces, hindering existing views and passages, and the remaining space of the apartment functions as a backdrop.

Displaced storage

With the placing of objects and personal effects out of view, comes the pressure of disclosure, and the closed nature of the closet threatens to disfunction, or function, to reveal its contents. The storage unit produces, at its most intimate, and its most public, a somewhat dialectical relationship to various points and locations outside (of the apartment). In this sense, storage engages not simply that which is not worn at the moment, or a supply of extra dishes, but also those items or ideas which are to be kept concealed against the rest of the apartment. The particular contents aside, a mapping of sorts, connecting specific spaces and events, locates one of its points of reference within the logic of storage, (at this point such spaces as shoeboxes and notebooks, and make shift storage under, over, and behind existing furniture and architecture figure in). As well-known New York interior designer put it, “Open the bottom drawer of a client’s nightstand, and you’ve opened the door to their soul.”

AK
Do you consider this work a critique of modernism?

TB
This question was on all of our minds, and this was certainly one premise of the exhibition. But I didn’t want to be so directly critical of the situation. Instead, I wanted to exploit it, to make the conditions unhinge themselves, rather than create a kind of distance by pointing. Le Corbusier’s masterplan in Firminy was simply a set of found conditions that I wanted to work with.

AK
These “found conditions” point in multiple directions, both to the historical building—and some of its limitations or oversights—as well as the contemporary post-1989 moment. The Unités were meant to be social projects, promoting a very spartan, economized, tailored way of living, which in many ways seems not to have been adequate for habitation. This way of living is also in space. I enclosed the outside perimeter of the loggia, blocking the view of the apartment and creating more emphatically a room, an enclosed storage space. The glass doors leading out to the loggia also became activated in a different way through this enclosure. Now, without the outside light passing through them, the loggias became highly reflective surfaces, reflecting the body of a viewer and the inside of the room behind while also collapsing the viewer’s body into the enclosed space of the loggia.
tension with this “open” moment and its interest in collecting, in accumulation . . .

REBECCA SELLE
You mentioned storage on the balconies, which are public and visible to all; but in the past you’ve written that the purpose of storage is to conceal.

AK
And most of the people living in the building in the 1990s, when you made the piece, were foreign-born, so ideas of Frenchness were also in play.

FLANNERY SEAGER-STRODE
Why do you think those tensions arose? Did it have to do with the fact that the artists in the project were entering a private space?

TB
That was one of the reasons that the curators decided to do the exhibition in the first place. It was a moment of crisis in this particular building, and in this particular community. And it was also a pivotal moment for many of the artists in the exhibition. Many of us were dealing with the notion of site and site-specificity, and trying to rethink what site-specificity was and could be.

We were very sensitive to the fact that we were outsiders and had the privilege of being able to visit a certain space and speak for it. There was tension between the artists and the residents, and there was also mutual curiosity as well. We weren’t necessarily invited into people’s homes. We were very much voyeurs, and vice versa. There were a few projects in the exhibition that created explicit links between the artist and the residents, but in general we had separate lives.

TB
There is a privilege in being able to descend upon a situation and to embark on an analysis. Our stakes and the residents’ stakes were not the same. This project wasn’t a decorative or aesthetic project, and it didn’t necessarily
HUMBERTO MORO
Can you speak about the notion of human absence in the work?

SAMUEL WILLIAMS
I’m curious about how you feel The Storage Project fits into the context of museum furniture tableaux. Everything in period rooms is there for visitors to look at—they present complete visions—as opposed to allowing visitors to interpret the objects and to project different contexts and spaces for the objects to live in.

AK
“This is how people lived then.”

fall under terms that were commonly used in discussing art’s function. The individual works and the project as a whole may have been opaque from the outside.

This was also a very xenophobic community. Residents were largely immigrants who themselves had been marginalized, so there was anxiety about the notion of outsiders. The majority of us didn’t speak French very well either. So there were layers upon layers of problems with our model from the outset.

Part of our privilege was our freedom to come and go. Life in the Unité was not our daily reality. Attempts to grapple with these dichotomies at times seemed to make it more frustrating, though in my project at least they were a large part of what generated the work.

TB
Human absence is very relevant to the way I think. In 1993 I was coming out of a context of feminism and thinking through issues around subjectivity and difference. We had seen a decade of devastation due to the AIDS crisis and I was grappling with what it meant to give image and form to ideas around subjectivity and context, and about physicality and loss. How to image the subject, or how not to. During this period, to talk about desire, to talk about politics, to talk about gay people, to talk about the intersection of these things almost necessarily meant you were involved in figuration, in imaging the body. I was trying to be careful about questions of absence. Instead of trying to picture additional bodies, I was trying to make work that would reflect on the bodies that might be experiencing the work while at the same time considering the absence of bodies that had occurred through death, through censorship, through historical negation. I was trying to suggest that the audience occupies the work, and by extending that phenomenological setting to include differentiated subjectivities, cast the formal conditions in a political light.

With The Storage Project, if I were to start to picture or image subject positions, rather than engage viewers to consider their own bodies in space, I would shut down a certain ability for that work to ricochet and to implicate. I’m interested in the self-consciousness that one feels as a spectator when there is nothing completely absorbing to focus your singular attention on.

TB
I think that’s a very generative comparison. I’m interested in a lack of fulfillment in terms of the narrative, but I’m also interested in the anticipations and the expectations that the partial view produces. In period rooms there is the desire to create a complete narrative that might be easily consumed as some sort of truth.

TB
This is how people lived then, in all of its completeness. I’m trying to do something that’s quite distinct from that, which is to have the work be more of a physical receptacle of ideas rather than truths.
AK
The humor of this work is also striking—in the sense that this is so clearly not the solution. Right? We don’t want to live here either. The work is wonky and excessive, and obstructs the space. You’re not troubleshooting here.

TB
No. It’s a bit more “the revenge of the objects.” And you’re right, I’m not offering any solutions, far from that. The piece is more of a grappling with some of the problems and contradictions inherent in domestic space, and the conflation of private and public space. I was trying to accentuate the role that architectural forms and settings play in constituting identity and societal structures generally. I was letting the problems become amplified and scream a little bit more loudly.