

Dalibor Veselý's Flat: The Dwelling as a Communicative Field, and Repository of Culture and Memory

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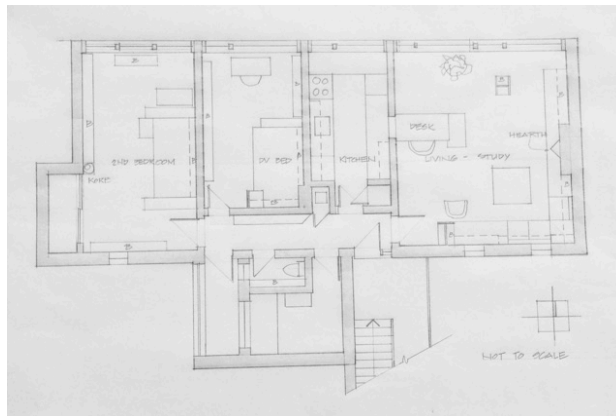
Abstract:

The paper and accompanying photos aim to record something of the late Dalibor Veselý's long-term home and studio, before it is dispersed. It is also an attempt to interpret the flat in terms of the twentieth-century introverted culture of dwelling, private collecting as a stimulus to memory and creativity, and of communicative space structured through the metaphoricity of the fragment. The flat and its contents represent, it is also argued, its owner's belief in the continued significance of the European city as an embodiment of cultural tradition, and its relevance to today's architecture.



Fig. 1. Christopher Lodge. Highgate, DV in Edinburgh in 2008. DV's study-living room, with hearth, Turgot Plan of Paris, music collection, Baroque and modern artefacts, memorabilia, student collage, books chiefly on modern art and the Baroque, Kircher on the coffee table-plinth, violin on the sofa (photo by Will Pryce).

The architect, teacher, critic and philosopher of architecture, Dalibor Veselý, suffered the heart attack which would take his life at his North London flat on 31 March 2015.¹ He had lived there for the previous four and a half decades, through two marriages and several key academic engagements. It was his quiet haven of creative and contemplative life, a contrast to the active, sometimes combative life of the public sphere, teaching, and university politics [Fig. 1]. Here he thought, wrote, and devised seminal courses in the history and philosophy of architecture, and in architectural design, two areas which, as he always stressed, were to be understood in reciprocity.² The philosophical approach to architecture which he pioneered through his teaching and writing has now become one of the mainstream critical branches of architectural discourse. The flat contains DV's near 7000-volume multi-lingual library, representing to the man who assembled it, the outline of an architectural culture, and a personal intellectual journey.³ In addition there is a collection of artefacts, art and students' work, antique folk pottery, and personal memorabilia chronicling a lifetime. As Frosso Pimenides, DV's third wife who shared the flat with him for a number of years, has observed, for him exploring London had limited appeal; the flat and the culture contained within it was his real habitat, his world.⁴ As with the Paris studio and apartment of André Breton, it temporarily remains intact, following the inhabitant's sudden departure. This paper, and the accompanying photographs, are an attempt to interpret and record some of its contents and meaning, in so far as they communicate the occupant's distinctive world view.⁵



¹ Martin Vesely conversation with the author, March 2016.

² The seminal courses which DV ran at the University of Essex, the Architectural Association and University of Cambridge, with colleagues including Joseph Rykwert, Mohsen Mostafavi and Peter Carl, are now well documented (see for example *Phenomenologies of the City*, *Architecture and Continuity*, *The Living Tradition of Architecture* (forthcoming), DV obituaries by Eric Parry, David Leatherbarrow and Helen Mallinson, and Joseph Bedford's Columbia University PhD). These initiated a new approach to architecture through reference to phenomenology and a hermeneutical understanding of architectural history and tradition.

³ Dr Drahosh Veselý, conversation with the author, March 2016. The books are mainly in English, German, French and Czech, with a few in Italian and Latin. According to DV's wishes, the library is being bequeathed to the Charles University in Prague, his *alma mater*, with the undertaking that it be kept together as a unity. DV once joked that if something is not in his library, it will not be in his synoptic book. Conversation with the author c. 2000.

⁴ Frosso Pimenides, conversation with the author, March 2016.



Fig. 2. Sketch plan of flat. Study-living room with desk, books chiefly on phenomenology and hermeneutics on the wall, kitchen hatch with a 17th-century view of Stockholm above, a facsimile of Minoan Phaistos disc brought back by DV and Frosso from Crete in the late 1970s, after taking part in an archaeological dig there (photo by Will Pryce).

The flat

In the early 1970s, shortly after their move to Britain, Dalibor Veselý and his second wife, Jana, moved into the two-bedroom, top-floor flat in Christopher Lodge in leafy Highgate. The building is a four-storey, International Style box, with garages at ground level and a large shared garden. Access to the flats is provided by open-air staircases.⁶ It may have been designed a few years before by the architectural practice of Douglas Stephen and Partners, with the involvement of the young Kenneth Frampton⁷ [Fig. 1, 2]. True to modernist principles, all the rooms of the flats have ample natural light – the major rooms from north or south-facing, large strip windows running the full length of the façades, the minor rooms from three internal courts. Somewhat unusually, the flats also have a number of small pierced windows to front and back, providing a series of illuminated recesses. Otherwise, the architecture, while elegant, is bare, stripped of most symbolic elements. The interior of DV's flat consists of one large living-dining

⁵ The flat was recorded by photographer Will Pryce on 27 February, 2016. Some of the other photos included here were taken by the author, while others were borrowed from the Veselý family archive.

⁶ The lack of lifts proved increasingly challenging to DV in his final years, the flat becoming a centre of his life.

⁷ DV sometimes told visitors that the flat was designed by Frampton, while Frampton himself does not recall the building. KF in email conversation with the author, March 2016.

room, which he used as his studio/study. This is connected by a serving hatch to a small kitchen.⁸ The bedrooms likewise are along the north-facing front of the building. Over the years, new bookcases were added to house the growing book collection, so that now all rooms, including the toilet, are packed with books on open shelving. [Fig. 3]. On moving in, DV and Jana designed a number of built-in elements – a low bench along two sides of the living room which functions as a hearth, a rather spartan sofa and a display plinth, a fold-down table, a book column, a series of bookcase-partitions and plinths. Planes and plinths sometimes appear to slide with respect to one another, in a vaguely de Stijl manner. Some walls in the flat are textured with hessian wallpaper, and there is a theatrical, thematic colour scheme to walls and woodwork. Atmospherically lit and seen through a veil of cigarette smoke, all of this succeeded in giving a laconic modernist interior an infusion of architectural drama. While the flat is quite modest and austere – DV was not given to showy interior decoration – there seems to be a thematic intention to many of the arrangements, which I shall explore.



Fig. 3. End/Guest bedroom, formerly Frosso's room. Books on Greek philosophy and ancient cultures, cast of Kore (behind bookcase on right), Libeskind print in window (photo by Will Pryce).

The split in modern culture, coherence of the Baroque, phenomenology

Growing into adulthood under the authoritarian Communist regime in post-war Czechoslovakia, within the circle of middle-class artistic intelligentsia (which was, by definition, dissident), instilled in the

⁸ Carolyn Steel recalls a dinner at the flat in 2011 when diners were seated on both sides of the hatch and conversed through it, March 2016. The kitchen and bathroom fittings seem to be the originals which came with the flat, a retro modernist look now again much in vogue.

young DV the need for independent thought.⁹ The official, naïve proclamations of technological and social progress had by the end of the 1950s come to sound very hollow, and the terrible injustices being carried out under the banner of scientific socialism affected most lives. Jan Patočka's phenomenology, with its critique of positivism and instrumental rationalism, must therefore have seemed particularly bold and relevant, and was of course seen by the authorities as dangerously subversive.¹⁰ DV's lifelong affinity with phenomenology and Surrealism, both concerned with human liberation, and the coherent understanding of reality rooted in concrete experience (and both viewed with disapproval by the authorities), can in part be seen in this light.¹¹ Related to this is his appreciation of the Surrealist principle of the continuity between the objective and the imaginary, between reality and dream, which characterizes human experience of the world.

DV's later critical view of modern culture was strongly conditioned by the deeply-held belief that with the advent of the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science and technology, Western culture suffered a harmful split which it has since been unable to overcome.¹² This replaced the coherent humanist view, rooted in the cosmological and symbolic tradition, by the abstract ways of instrumental rationalism, and separated the now aestheticized 'art' from the increasingly specialized branches of science. This conceptual view of the world has had a damaging impact on many areas of culture, and especially architecture. This is one of the reasons why DV felt a strong affinity with the Baroque, the dominant architectural language of Central Europe and of his native Prague. He saw in it the last time that western culture was a coherent whole, and architecture – in seamless synthesis with sculpture, painting, language and music – a richly communicative medium.¹³ At the same time, his view was characterized by a love of certain strands of early twentieth-century art, especially those – like Cubism, Purism, Expressionism and Surrealism – which prized the role of the imagination, and explored the primary phenomena of perception, non-perspectival space, and metaphor. This interest in modern art was no doubt strengthened by the fact that it was viewed with suspicion by the authorities.¹⁴ Interestingly, DV saw in modern art the potential to create a richly metaphorical culture, analogous to the Baroque. This theme underpinned the

⁹ During his PhD studies, ostensibly in engineering, DV independently pursued art, architecture and philosophy, attending also the clandestine phenomenology seminars of Jan Patočka. His precocious intellectual development was largely self-directed. Drahosh Veselý, conversation with the author, March 2016.

¹⁰ See for example Jan Patočka, 'The Natural World and Phenomenology', in Erazim Kohák, ed, *Jan Patočka. Philosophy and Selected Writings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 246–254. Patočka, beginning from the thought of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, sought a phenomenology which would address the specific moral issues at hand, and later lost his life standing up for its ethical principles.

¹¹ It is perhaps because of these circumstances that DV's philosophical convictions were so passionately held, and his style of arguing them sometimes a little combative.

¹² See Dalibor Veselý, "Architecture and the Conflict of Representation," *AA Files* 8, January 1985, pp. 21–38, and *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2004.

¹³ DV was an admirer of the Jesuits' scholarship and world view, which was so much at odds also with the secular positivism which was part of the official Communist ideology.

¹⁴ The subversive dimension of modern art in the political climate in Prague prior to 1968 is emphasized by Drahosh Veselý. Conversation with the author, March 2016.

exhibition *Aktualní nekonečno* (Actual Infinity), which took place at the National Gallery in Prague in 2000, for which DV acted as an advisor¹⁵ [Fig. 4]. Looking around the flat, it is striking how – in addition to philosophy and ancient Greece – many of the books and objects belong either to the Baroque or to modern art. One of DV's valued books was the 1650 edition of Athanasius Kircher's *Obeliscus Pamphilius*.¹⁶ The seventeenth-century polymath and museum curator Kircher was close to DV's heart. His syncretic approach was not yet marked by the artificial boundaries and categories which would come to govern the organization of knowledge in the nineteenth century. It blended philosophy and theology, art and science, human and natural products in the manner of the cabinet of curiosities, with analogy understood as a primary principle underlying cosmic order.



Fig. 4. Plates from the exhibition catalogue of *Aktualní nekonečno*, highlighting affinities between Baroque and modern art. Matthias Bernard Braun, *bozzetto* of a sculptural group on Charles Bridge, c. 1710, and Otto Gutfreund, *Anxiety*, 1912-13.

The city

For DV, Baroque culture had its fullest and most lasting embodiment in the European city, with his home city of Prague initiating in him a lifelong love of – and a curiosity about – cities around the world.¹⁷ For this reason, the traditional city, which he always saw as inseparable from theatre and festival, featured strongly in his library. It is also present in the flat in the two prominent bird's eye views decorating the study: the Turgot Plan of Paris beside the fireplace, and a view of seventeenth-century Stockholm above the kitchen hatch, next to his desk.¹⁸ [Fig. 1, 2]. The civic order manifest in the public realm, understood

¹⁵ Tomas Vlček, *Aktualní nekonečno (Actual Infinity) Konflikty a souvislosti baroka v moderním a současném českém umění*, Exhibition Catalogue, Prague: Galerie hlavního města Prahy, 2000.

¹⁶ Athanasius Kircher, *Obeliscus Pamphilius: hoc est, Interpretatio noua & Hucusque Intentata Obelisci Hieroglyphici*, 1650.

¹⁷ DV's travels included the US and Canada, Israel, Japan and China in addition to Europe.

¹⁸ On the significance of the city and its traditions, see especially DV and Mohsen Mostafavi, *Architecture and Continuity: Kentish Town projects, 1978-1981*, London: Architectural Association, 1982. The prints in the study are the Turgot Plan of Paris, 1735-39, and Stockholmia Orientem versus, from *Suecia Antiqua et Hodierna (Ancient and Modern Sweden)*, Stockholm: Erik J. Dahlberg, 1661. Above the hatch on the kitchen side hangs a drawing of a fantasy Greek town by Frosso's uncle, Hyppolitos Ides, which had been a wedding present. Peter Carl suggests that the conjunction of the city and window may have been a conscious motif for DV. March 2016.

as an essential situational ground, was always a key point of reference in DV's design projects and understanding of architectural history.



Fig. 5. Church of St Jiljí, Prague, which has a remarkable 1733 organ, DV's violin in the corner of the study, with Baroque sculptures, Chinese Scholar stone, and personal *objets à réaction poétique* in window alcove (photo by Will Pryce).

Music and architecture

Music likewise always played an important part in DV's life. Here again, growing up in the artistic, theatrical milieu of Prague, with its rich musical traditions and constant supply of Baroque church organ recitals and chamber concerts, was generative [Fig. 5]. DV had played the violin since childhood and was an accomplished amateur violinist, performing with his flute and piano-playing brother Drahosh and attending concerts in London.¹⁹ One corner of his study is devoted to his extensive music collection, featuring mostly Central European Baroque repertoire.²⁰ On one level the study, with its Baroque colours and wood surfaces, was always also a performance setting. Significantly, music was more than a pleasure but was seen as an integral part of (architectural) culture, reciprocal with the other disciplines. The experiential spatiality of the human world and of student design projects was to be understood partly through music and sound.

¹⁹ Drahosh Veselý in conversation with the author, March 2016.

²⁰ Baroque music was central – J.S. Bach, Mozart, Bieber, Zelenka, Haydn – although more modern favourites included Fauré, Janáček and Shostakovich.



Fig 6. Sigmund Freud's inward-looking study and collection in Vienna, 1938, André Breton in his studio in Rue Fontaine in Paris c.1960, Le Corbusier's *Sculpture and Nude*, 1929, with themes inspired by his *objets à réaction poétique*.

Twentieth-century culture of dwelling, interiority, collecting

DV's flat can in part be understood in terms of the modern concern with the culture of dwelling, to which he often alluded – in somewhat ambivalent terms – in his work. In response perhaps to the growing impoverishment of the nineteenth-century public realm (the gradual disappearance of ornament, craftsmanship, and thematic content in the industrial city), the private domain – the bourgeois interior – takes on a new cultural significance [Fig. 6]. As less civic life is played out in public, modern culture becomes characterized by an inwardness.²¹ At the same time, there is a new interest in the austere poetry of daily experience, which is reflected, for example, in Cubist or Purist art.²² Creative individuals – artists, writers, architects and so forth – tend to assemble their own culture in their dwelling or studio, through collecting and the sensibility which has been called the secular sacred. The dwelling/studio and its contents (often a personal collection of evocative objects, art and memorabilia) comes to represent their own inner life, and to exist in reciprocity with their work.²³

In his lectures, DV was fond of showing the remarkable Engelman photographs of the Vienna study and consulting room of Sigmund Freud, who used his collection of antiquities as mnemonics for archetypal themes which he saw hidden within the human psyche.²⁴ Archaeological excavation became for him a metaphor for the unearthing of motifs of his patients' unconscious. Surrealist writers and artists of the

²¹ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, and *Malaise of Modernity*, and DV, *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*.

²² With artists, bohemia is also a salient part of this trend, which – in addition to shocking the complacent – also involved austerity and renunciation. Avant-garde artists often seemed to live in straitened circumstances for artistic credibility as much as out of economic necessity (the Paris studio of Alberto Giacometti is a memorable example of this).

²³ Many of the things in Breton's studio collection, for example, became generative motifs in his writing. He would sometimes position objects around his study in new, evocative configurations as he was working. See Dagmar Motycka Weston, 'Communicating Vessels: André Breton and his Atelier, Home and Personal Museum in Paris', *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol. II, No. 2, 2006, pp. 101-128. Le Corbusier spoke of sometimes interacting with his *objets à réaction poétique* through touch. 'Objets à réaction poétique,' *Le Corbusier Lui-même*, Geneva: Rousseau, 1970.

²⁴ See Edmund Engelman, *Sigmund Freud: Wien IX. Berggasse 19*, Vienna: Verlag Christian Brandstätter, 1993.

1920s and 30s were well aware of Freud's approach; collecting was an integral part of their lives and very wide-spread.²⁵ However, the Surrealist collections were more akin to the seventeenth-century microcosmic cabinets of curiosities, with evocative *naturalia* and *artificialia* gathered together with an eye for the sparks of the marvellous generated by their unexpected displacements and new conjunctions. Their chief interest was in objective chance and its poetic consequences, made manifest in the assemblage of fragments. The worlds of their studios and collections nourished their work and expressed their ethos. DV was critical of the museal tendencies in modern culture where artefacts, severed from their original context, become isolated and objectified. He especially questioned the value of a private museum.²⁶ His own collection, consisting mainly of gifts, family heirlooms, student work, and evocative fragments which had more personal than monetary value, could scarcely be classed as a museum. It was, however, a species of curiosity cabinet, in that it delineated a thematic world. The flat is filled with work of students and colleagues, which unlike a conventional art collection, has no financial motive and comes saturated with personal ideas, pride, affection and memories.²⁷ It becomes a theatre of memory of sorts of the collector's life.

DV was well acquainted with the world of artists' studios – often cellars and garrets – from his youth in Prague [Fig. 7].²⁸ Exhibitions, philosophical debates, and performances were often held in such semi-private places as it was safer and cheaper than to do so in public. Thus artists' studios served the multiple functions of home, gallery, wine bar and café, makeshift theatre and samizdat publishing house. In the mythologised modern *topos* (seen for example in the work of Picasso or Matisse), they also provided a setting for erotic encounter and mysterious creativity.²⁹ A memory of these themes is perhaps still palpable in DVs' conception of his study. He was of course deeply interested in the play of what he called positive fragments, and their remarkable power to structure an analogical field, a thematic world.³⁰ The often unexpected meanings which thus spontaneously arise are accessible on a pre-reflective level.

²⁵ The young Breton visited Freud in Vienna and would presumably have seen his consulting rooms.

²⁶ As he remarked to the author during a visit to the enormous collection of tribal and Outsider art assembled in his country home by the Czech artist and film maker, Jan Švankmajer in 2008.

²⁷ DV kept these until the end, sometimes for many decades. A book collection is also a highly personal enterprise, which inevitably becomes a record of shifting interests and intellectual development.

²⁸ DV's father had a studio in Čechova Street, near the boys' home in the Letná district of Prague, and later got an attic studio on the embankment of the Vltava near the Mánes gallery. A range of people often met there. Drahosh Veselý in conversation with the author, March 2016.

²⁹ In Prague in the early 1960s DV was involved with a group of avant-garde artists who called their movement the 'Informel', and who included Mikuláš Medek and Aleš Veselý (no relation). DV's role seems to have been primarily to provoke discussion and to formulate the philosophical foundations of the new movement. See Mahulena Nešlehová, *Poselství jiného výrazu. Pojetí 'informelu' v českém umění 50. a první poloviny 60. let*. Prague: ARTetFACT, 1997.

³⁰ Dalibor Veselý, "Architecture and the Ambiguity of the Fragment" in R. Middleton ed, *The Idea of the City*, London: The Architectural Association, 1996, pp. 108-121 and Dagmar Motycka Weston, 'Le Corbusier and the Restorative Fragment at the Swiss Pavilion', in C. Hermansen and M. Hvattum (eds), *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*: London: Routledge, 2004, pp.173-194.

This approach, which stresses the communicative power inherent in spatial relationships, also underlay DV's approach to architectural design and is manifest in the flat.



Fig. 7. DV with artist friends in a studio in Prague in the 1960s, the studio of DV's painter father, Josef Veselý (north light, antique folk pottery, discarded religious art), Informel group's exhibition *Konfrontace II* in the basement studio of Aleš Veselý, 1960.

The Thematic content of the flat

Abhorring things which have been cut off from a meaningful context and objectified, DV always stressed the importance of thematic relationships (given that in the pre-reflective world of experience, everything is connected in one way or another through analogy). He stressed the richness of such situational relationships, and inevitably, his own home reveals a similar thematic order. Arriving at the top of external stair and facing the glazed front door of DV's flat, a visitor would have been greeted by his silhouette, outlined against the background of a large print of Juan Gris' cubist *Violin*³¹ [Fig. 8]. This announced both the dwelling of a musician and his engagement with the sensory world of Cubist space. The corridor is shadowy, lined with dark hessian wall paper and rather chthonic. Turning right into the study-living room, a small 'vestibule' is made from dark shelving containing books on the occult, Hermetic and magic traditions - Flood, Dee, Paracelsus, Bruno, alchemy, the works of Frances Yates.³² (The counterpoint to this area of occult sciences, the history and philosophy of modern science, is located on the opposite, light side of the study, in the alcove below the long window.³³) Below the occult section are several shelves of books on the garden, mostly Renaissance and Baroque. With the study often dimly

³¹ This is a poster for the 1974 Gris Exhibition at the Orangerie Gallery in Paris, brought back from a visit. On the other side of the corridor is a large Daniel Libeskind etching.

³² When I began looking at the library, I fully expected it to be arranged thematically along Surrealist principles, with subject areas linked through analogy, spatial proximities and the symbolic orientation of space. This is in part the case, and may have been so at earlier stages. As the library grew, however, and more shelving had to be constructed to hold it, more pragmatic principles began increasingly to take hold – books went where there was space, and were sometimes arranged, as with most ordinary private libraries, by size. Many began to sediment in piles around the desk, on window sills, coffee table and recently even in the kitchen. However, enough of a thematic order exists to allow certain readings.

³³ DV was well acquainted with the methods and dilemmas of modern science, not only through reading or his engineering background, but chiefly through his scientist brother Drahosh, who taught material physics at Oxford University.

lit by pools of light, there is a sense of entering a domain of arcane knowledge. Two dark thematic studies hang on the brown wall to the right.



Fig. 8. Juan Gris, *Violin*, 1916, Entry to the study and occult knowledge, corner of study with books mostly on the Baroque and Surrealism, two Haban traditional folk ceramic vases (probably 1th century, gift from DV's father) and Chinese relief in the window alcove (right photo by Will Pryce).

Colour scheme

Baroque interiors tend to use colour and materials according to a symbolic tradition related to the cosmic order. The lower, human zone – floor, wall panelling, study furniture, pews, confessionals and so forth – tends to be made of tactile, warm, dark wood, evocative of the chthonic level of the cosmos and human finitude [Fig. 5]. The walls, which are the backdrop to the drama of saints and angels, tend to be covered with lighter, pastel colours and artificial marbles, and – in monastic interiors – with bookcases or specimen collections. Vaults, cornices and ceilings are usually an ambiguous zone of transition between the earth and heaven, with white and gold cloud-like *rocaille* borders dissolving the solid body of the earthly building, opening it up to the heavens, to the glimpses of the celestial theatre of the frescoes, and to the divine in the immaterial form of actual light.

The colour scheme of DV's flat, with dark wood floors and woodwork, pale or colourful walls (grey pink, natural hessian, light and dark brown) and white ceilings, is reminiscent of this.³⁴ The dark brown lower walls behind the seating plinth in the study-living room are highly dramatic. Reminiscent of warm wood panelling, these areas act as a foil to the slender dark-wood bookshelves (which carry their heavy load without any visible means of support). The most conspicuous use of colour is in the three areas of intense Siena red.³⁵ In the living room-study this occurs in the bold accents of the fireplace wall and

³⁴ Peter Carl notes that this range of colours was also the basis of DV's students' exhibitions from the mid 1980s onward.

³⁵ This shade of Siena is known in the decorating world as 'Apache Brown'. It was carefully chosen and applied by DV during his redecoration of the flat in the late 1980s. DV in conversation with the author c. 1989. The colour of

around the opening to the kitchen [Fig 1, 2]. Both are associated with fire and the domestic hearth. The third area of red occurs in DV's bedroom, around at the head of the bed.³⁶ The references to fire here are of a more metaphorical kind. The gradations of colour and light in the flat, from dark interiority to celestial white seem to have a thematic intention, and lend the simple modern space drama.

The hearth

The living room-study contains several situational configurations. One of these is the fireplace and its attendant objects [Fig 1]. Raised on the bench plinth (here covered with dark tiles) and set against the red background, it contains the hearth (with the fire alcove angled towards the seating),³⁷ a white marble sculpted fragment of a man carrying a cross,³⁸ a Joseph Cornell-like box assemblage with a mirror,³⁹ and a dark collage.⁴⁰ The two white candles in ecclesiastic brass candlesticks have probably been lit more often than the fire. The whole configuration, the focus of the room and a representation of dwelling and of primordial architecture, has strong secular-sacred overtones.⁴¹

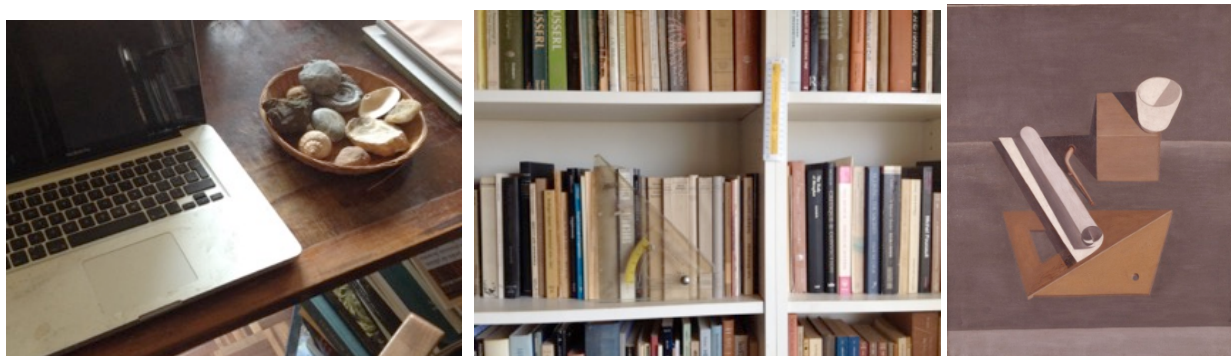


Fig. 9. DV's desk: computer and basket of stones, fossils and shells (some from Patmos, where DV vacationed), his architectural tools. Le Corbusier, *The White Bowl*, 1919

The desk area

the ceiling tiles and most surfaces now appear beige, and it is difficult to judge the original colour after exposure to many years of cigarette smoke.

³⁶ Each of the two beds in the flat is framed in a kind of alcove, and consists of a mattress on a simple white wooden podium, surrounded by ledges, shelving and side-table plinth. Only DV's bed has the Siena red background.

³⁷ The purist hearth was designed by DV and Jana, and replaced the probably conventional original gas fire.

³⁸ This seems to be a man helping Christ with the cross, rather than the saviour himself. The period of the fragment is probably nineteenth-century.

³⁹ This is a collage sculpture made by Ken Turner as part of a design and fabrication workshop run with DV and Helen Mallinson in the late 1970s.

⁴⁰ This is a thematic study by Clare Gerrard of her experimental cinema, part of the Spitalfields Diploma project at the University of Cambridge in the late 1980s. Nearby is an etching by Aleš Veselý, a member of the 1960s Informel group, and now a prominent Czech artist.

⁴¹ One is reminded of the Vitruvian narrative of the origins of architecture around a communal fire, and also of Le Corbusier's 'first painting,' *La Cheminée*, 1918, which is a secular-sacred evocation of dwelling.

The other focus of the study is the dark wooden desk, suspended on one side from the wall⁴² [Fig. 2]. It is accompanied by two somewhat spartan wooden chairs, a substantial one for DV, and a rather uncomfortable Thonet bent-wood chair for the visitor.⁴³ The bookcases on either side of the desk, within DV's reach, contain mainly philosophy books: phenomenology and hermeneutics – Husserl, several shelves of Heidegger, Patočka, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer, Ricoeur and so forth.⁴⁴ There are also many volumes of Nietzsche, and dictionaries within reach of the chair. The objects surrounding the work area – computer equipment, equipoise lamp, basket of stones and fossils, ashtrays, coffee cups passed through the kitchen hatch – manifest a spontaneous spatial arrangement reflecting the spatiality of the body. This situational order, which DV often used as illustration in his talks, had also been noted by Le Corbusier.⁴⁵ On the floor, propped up against the desk, is a very large volume of Vitruvius. It is tempting to see this as symbolic of the foundational role of the Roman writer in Western architecture. However, given DV's reservations about his view of architecture, here it seems to have been a case of the book not fitting anywhere else.⁴⁶ A significant place seems to have been reserved for architectural tools. There is DV's old adjustable plastic set square propped up near the desk, and a small architectural scale, taped to the bookcase.⁴⁷ These intimately tactile tools, extensions of the hand and imagination for any architect trained before the digital age, recall certain Metaphysical still lifes or Le Corbusier's evocations of the *vita contemplativa* [Fig. 9].

⁴² The desk consists of two hinged pieces, and is attached to the kitchen wall so as to be able to close the hatch. This was apparently not done very much, and the table became DV's permanent work area. There is another desk in the flat, in DV's bedroom.

⁴³ The flat contains two of these classic Thonet chairs, prized for their typicality by Le Corbusier.

⁴⁴ There are many other types of books around the desk, some in piles surrounding the desk and on it, which were being used most recently.

⁴⁵ "The distances that separate [these objects] are the measure of life." Le Corbusier, *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991, p. 9.

⁴⁶ DV was critical of the Vitruvian view of architecture as a matter largely of building technology.

⁴⁷ DV's collection includes what may be a prehistoric knapped-flint cutting tool, the archetypal artefact. Purism emphasized the poetic typicality and use value of human tools, some as old as civilization itself, with Le Corbusier later dedicating one section of his *Poem of the Right angle* to the *outil*.



Fig. 10. *Kore* in second bedroom, Totalitarianism in the toilet (photos by Will Pryce).

There are numerous other examples in the flat where evocative fragments are combined – often jarringly – to evoke specific, quasi-autobiographical meanings [Fig. 1, 5 and 10]. There is the grouping of Baroque sculptures,⁴⁸ Chinese Scholar stone,⁴⁹ antique Indian lock,⁵⁰ artworks and personal memorabilia in the dark corner of the study. Nearby is the ‘column of books,’ combining travel books on visited cities on the window side, with nineteenth-century German and French poetry in the shadows. On the side facing the desk, prominently displayed, is an ink and chalk drawing, with memories of Greek friends and the unit taught at the AA.⁵¹ The second bedroom is filled mostly with books about archaic and ancient cultures – Egypt, Ancient Near East, Etruria, Greece and Rome. The bed alcove is presided over by a cast of one of the 6th-century BC *korai* found on the Acropolis. A smiling maiden, a *kore*, is thought to be a votive figure or an attendant of the goddess Athena, and suggests here the realm of the feminine.⁵² Finally, evil and architecture’s complicity in it is evoked in the toilet. It contains a collection of books on

⁴⁸ The two Baroque sculptures were given to DV by his father. According to DV’s brother, the larger is Matthias Braun’s scale clay model (*bozzetto*) for one of the sculptural groups on the Charles Bridge in Prague, early eighteenth century. Drahosh Veselý in conversation with the author, March 2016.

⁴⁹ These mystical stones, prized in China as objects of contemplation of nature’s wonders, bear a resemblance to certain Renaissance and Baroque motifs [grotto etc]. DV’s specimen seems to have been acquired on a visit to China with David Leatherbarrow.

⁵⁰ Given to DV by the author c.1998.

⁵¹ The drawing is by Athanasios Spanomaridis and has a Greek dedication in appreciation of DVs’ teaching, c. 1979.

⁵² The cast of the *kore* was probably bought from the Acropolis museum shop during one of DV’s visits. The room also contains a number of works of art, including Daniel Libeskind’s Chirico-esque print with a fragmentary classical head. DV’s chosen name for Frosso was Danaë, after the mythical mother of Perseus and lover of Zeus, who impregnated her through a shower of gold. This miraculous moment of conception has been the subject of many erotic depictions, from antique Greek pottery to Gustav Klimt. This illustrates, perhaps, DV’s deep romanticism, love for mythical narratives and his Surrealistic belief in the essential role of the imagination in daily life. It is also suggestive, perhaps, of his tendency to want to change people.

various forms of authoritarianism and totalitarian oppression – The Nazis, the concentration camps, Speer, Communism (Stalin, Lenin, Mao), American theocracy. Above the books hangs a Robert Wood collage evocative of human bondage by a repressive mechanism.⁵³

DV's flat is the unprepossessing dwelling of a man who was completely absorbed in his work, and who had little time or interest for ostentatious interior design. Nevertheless, for those who knew him, his home adds an extra layer of meaning, further illuminating his life and his view of the world. Foremost was his insistence, embodied in the things which he gathered in his studio, on the crucial importance of a coherent, traditional culture, now, in his view, gravely assailed from several sides. The oppressive dictates he resisted in his youth are still present: the obsession with progress and technology and the neglect of rich architectural traditions, instrumental values, an unthinking conformity to mind-numbing popular culture, rationality valued above poetry. Finally, the flat in a modest way demonstrates the thematic thinking and love of analogy which always permeated DV's understanding of architecture and his design teaching.⁵⁴



Fig. 11. DV at work in Prague

⁵³ The architect Robert Wood developed an early interest in the communicative potential of collage. This piece combining fragments from Piranesi, Doré and Didérot, and was made during his diploma studies in DV's unit in Cambridge. Wood notes that his original intention in making it had little to do with my reading, and also that it had previously hung elsewhere in the flat, and was only moved into this thematic setting at some later point. The fact that DV created this setting, however, indicates the mystery and richness of the collage process.

⁵⁴ I am very grateful to members of the Veselý family for giving me access to the flat, allowing photos to be taken, and for sharing their memories with me. I would also like to thank the friends and colleagues of DV, who have cast light on some of the objects.