

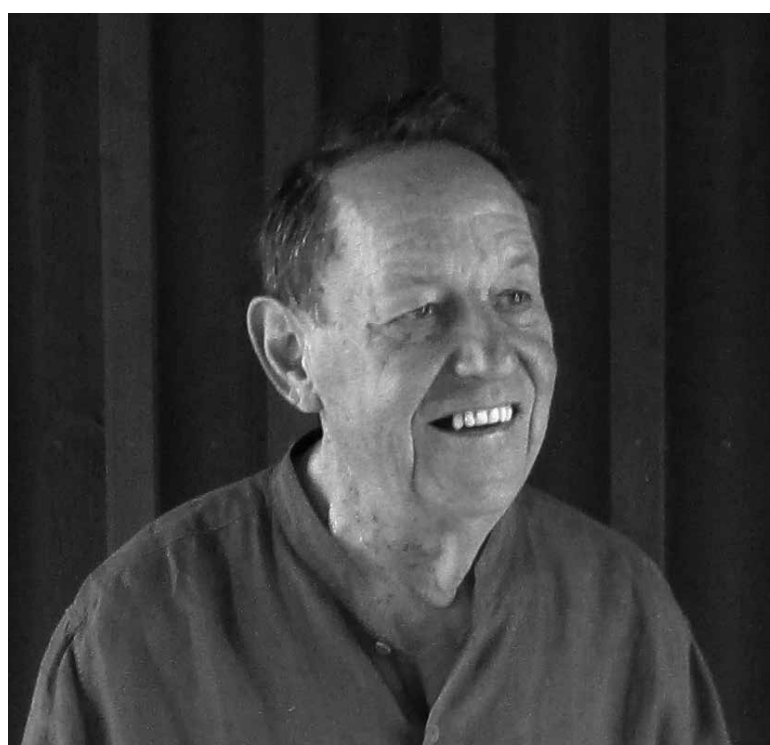
Florian Beigel:

1941–2018

Elizabeth B. Hatz

The most intense collective architectural spaces are often half outdoors, in-between spaces that remain both sheltered and open, simultaneously allowing for, and charged with, formal significance. They can accommodate everyday life and collective ritual while connecting house and landscape, interiority and place, art and nature. In the work of architect Florian Beigel [1], such spaces took on a significant role throughout his creative, influential, and rich career. These infrastructures serve to open architecture up to a fluid relationship with the environment, underlining the vulnerable cultures we should nourish and protect in the age of the Anthropocene. His seminal design for the Half Moon Theatre in London, 1979, can be seen as a Borges-like collection of labyrinthine spaces that alternate in being the ‘outside’ of one another, making spatial relations theatrically ambiguous. The Theatre’s intricate plan [2] continues to act as touchstone for both architects and students, and the bold freshness of its construction, in blockwork and steel, continue to inspire an acute and precise economy of means in a world that longs for imagination, sympathy, and care.

Over the many years that Florian Beigel and his partner Philip Christou worked on projects in Korea, the example of the Ma-Dang – a courtyard space of deep significance in vernacular architecture – returned thematically and formally. The *madang* – ‘a courtyard or a space within the wall around the house [... etymologically] also means a shared space where people carry out communal activities’, and thus connects domestic half-interiority with collective ritual.¹ In Beigel and



1 Florian Beigel in Sweden 2014.

Christou’s work, this ambiguous and enabling half-space idea seems present both in their beautiful open folly, the Seowonmoon Lantern (2011), and the intricate weave of solids and voids involved in reworking part of the last shanty town in Seoul, the so-called Moon Village. Courtyards and covered entrance steps, half-open pocket spaces and terraces are intertwined in an intricate architectural ‘conglomerate ordering’ (to use Alison and Peter Smithson’s apposite term),² thus forming an everchanging entity.

Here, the in-between realm is able to act as a joining infrastructure and an architectural figure in one.

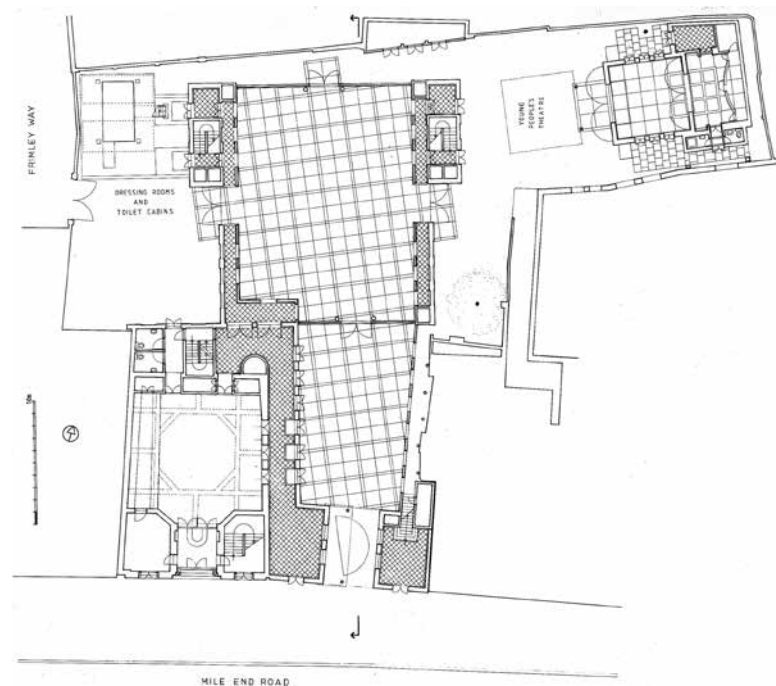
It engages an outdoor staircase as well as a shed-like structure, akin to the architectural fragments that Beigel and Christou would transpose from Giotto’s frescoes into their own poetic drawings. It is familiar to the gentle transformation of detail that allowed new layers to be added, for instance, in the alteration and refurbishment of Bishopsfield Housing, 1994 (arq 1:1, 28–45); based on a shift and sliding edge that apparently served to liberate a surface from its material and technological straightjacket to enable it to become part of a fresh cultural whole. In this way, existing and new were united in a conversation that engaged and

underlined the idea of the room itself. The resulting relaxed elegance, in tune with the original, is the hallmark of Florian Beigel's utmost sensibility to the character of existing architecture: a sensibility based both on engaging encounter and deep formal understanding. These frail spaces, barely held by structure, are captured by the delicacy of line, like the branches of a leafless tree holding a particular room in a garden [3]. The ground itself is a part of this formation of rooms, like personalities in conversation, when a bend or a slope are skillfully appropriated as locus. Florian Beigel's hand drawings are the best way to discover and understand the lines that, in the architecture, manage to hold and form these half-rooms. They are brittle, almost flattened, like the collapsed templesheds in Giotto's frescoes. Therefore, surfaces and their immaterial lines of relief, where light and shadow become also tactile, are spaces for the mind to inhabit. It is not the line of manifest perfection, but a precision in the slight and conscious imperfection, in the shifted but restrained, a type of studied negligence (think Cicero, via Castiglione) that lends a sense of ease, and conceals its own art.

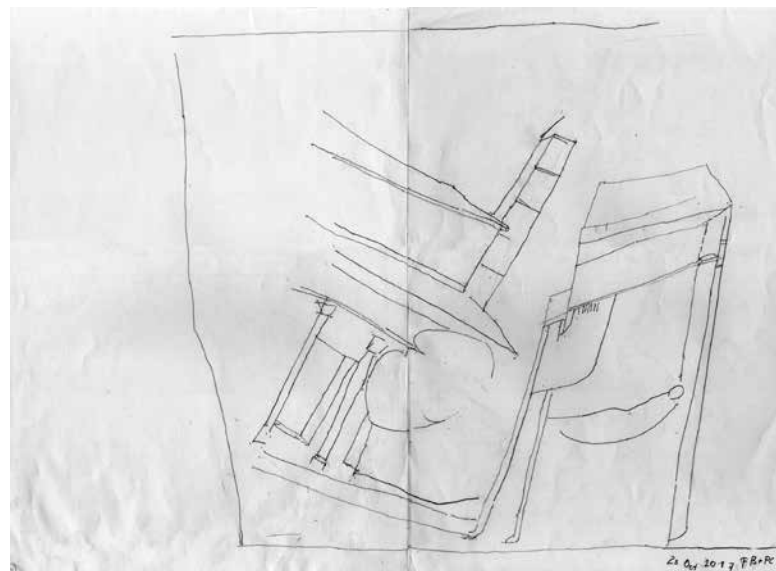
Immensity and intimacy

The first time I met Florian Beigel was in the 1990s, when a former student of both of his and mine, Roger Spetz, invited him to Stockholm. On a cold and dull day, we visited a project I designed, an extension to a 1940s industrial brick tower with two new tall floors of laboratories, made in unevenly burnt brick from East Germany under a huge zinc roof. This was my ugliest building, which would never be published: an odd alteration in an industrial area. Florian muttered: 'beauty is not about looks, it is about presence, character. This is real; I approve.' The unexpected encouragement at once said something about Florian's bold independence and his generosity, because he was bluntly frank and sharp in his judgements.

Encountering Florian Beigel was like arriving at the threshold of a world of immensity and intimacy, a landscape where a bus shelter could enter a dialogue with a sanctuary, where wild grass could constitute as solid an architectural presence as a block wall, where the affinity between a building's



2 Half Moon Theatre Plan.



3 *Still Life 21_171023* by Florian Beigel and Philip Christou, pencil on cartridge paper, exhibited at Betts Project, London and at *Line, Light, Locus* at Venice Biennale 2018.

persona and its place would become crystal clear. His ever inquisitive but doubtless affirmative thoughts would urge you to lightly push the door ajar and tread quietly with your curiosity alert, your eyes and mind fused into one single attentive embrace of architecture [4].

Few persons had, like Florian Beigel, the ability to cast aside the restricting and obscuring baggage of fashion, pseudo-intellectual posturing, and false pretences. This was as useful for his own creative professional path as for the lucky architects and students who had the privilege to be guided by his

temperamental architectural personality. He was a truth detector and an architectural dowser in one. His ability to scan and reveal architectural quality in both the ordinary, the real, and the imagined made him a unique leader in our field. He was an architect for life. His buildings always contained an unusual balance between that which seems to have always existed and that which just opened its eyes for the first time to gaze candidly at this old world: inventive and experienced at the same time.

This capacity may have stemmed also from his own long experience

of architecture as something fundamental; as the alteration of the ground, the land, the nature of which we are all part. His project for Lichterfelde Süd in Berlin (arq 3:3, 202–219), repairing and recovering land from polluting industries to enable re-inhabitation, took the radical step to lay out gardens first, long before buildings would come and negotiate their place on that recovered ground. The proposal is completely bold and



4 Florian Beigel at Jonas Bohlin's house Ångsvillan, Sweden.

philosophically reversed in process to the one generally adopted today for building and developing. It manifests clearly architecture's dependence on, and role in, a nature where we are an integral part, rather than its masters. Few other architects have exposed such seismographic sensitivity for architecture's fragility and its powers. This was part of his rock-solid core of integrity, which sometimes cut with sharp edges, but remained driven by gentle sympathy and deep care.

Care and culture

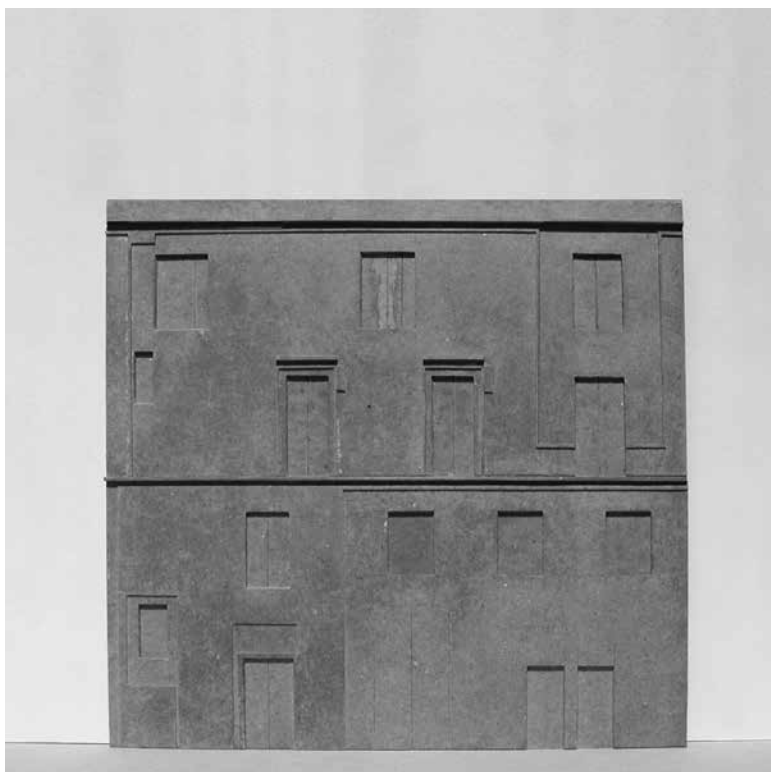
This sense of care also remains at the core of architectural concerns manifested as *culture*. It was important in the way that Florian Beigel and Philip Christou, with fervent energy as well as subtle perception, built their ARU (Architecture Research Unit), at London Metropolitan University as a territory where limits between practice, education, and publication could be erased to form an open but characteristic evolving cultural domain. Robert Mull, as head of the school, was instrumental in supporting this important platform that proved to have such deep impact on contemporary architectural practice and education, despite shying from trend-burdened media. It is possible that we shall

discover too late how decisive such work is in a world blinded by business-as-usual and driven through equal portions of soporific consumerism and aggressive profit, to the alarmingly rapid detriment of our planet. The small, delicate projects that bring a caring vision of the existing, through light shafts and bold exposures, such as their Moon Village (2014–), the YoulHwaDang Book Hall (2006–09), Welcomm City in Seoul (2006–09) [5], or the incredibly congenial alterations of London Met's architecture school in London's Aldgate (2012) – all speak of an acknowledgment of the poetry that inheres in the existing, and its transformation into connecting, meaningful, and permissive spaces for the public.

This delicate poetry, often made as if improvised and *ad hoc* (in the true meaning of the expression, namely with *appropriate means*) cannot be achieved without rigour and discipline. Nor without boldness and trust in the intuitive understanding of place. It cannot be achieved without endless iterations through drawing and years of observation of everyday life *in situ*, and the spaces that support it. It cannot come into being without that sensitive eye trained on the things around us, high and low, simple and human, and nor can it be formed without feeling. Florian did not shy from talking about feeling. He had the authority to do so, like few of us have. He combined a rare rigour and discipline with a sensuous haptic understanding of *things* in their complex material and spiritual existence.

Shifting the weight of our steps

It is impossible then that these *things of the world* would not speak back to the architect Florian Beigel, with all their incompleteness, their disarming humour, and their attractive integrity. Things made by our hands or by our machines or by both, things altered and repaired, sometimes combined in accidental but negotiating configurations. This is how art is born, through the unforeseen encounter between things seen and unseen. Florian Beigel's architecture evolved through a long life with art, where he effortlessly combined the two. In my exhibition at the 2018 Venice Biennale – *Line, Light, Locus* – a central piece, on the ultimate wall, *Mind Space*, was an enlargement of a



5 Model of facade relief for YoulHwaDang Book Hall.



6 Florian Beigel by the sheep house, Eriksberg Castle, Sweden.

drawing by Florian Beigel and Philip Christou from October 2017, previously exhibited in an exhibition at Betts Project, titled *A Dream of Innocence*. The two architects had been sitting in London looking at a small postcard of a Giotto painting; the fresco where Pope Innocent lies dreaming that Saint Francis holds up the falling sanctuary with his bare arms. Departing from the postcard they make a large still life pencil drawing on paper, characteristic of Florian's frail and yet distinct abstraction, capturing space and figure embracing each other endlessly.

The Giotto painting was made when architecture, craft, and art were intimately intertwined and part of a whole, of a culture. Both this and the story of the painting may well represent the pathos that

Florian Beigel's architecture points towards – a predicament for future architects – where we may focus not so much on building new, but rather caring, repairing, altering, and re-imagining the existing. And this is the coming field of wide creative possibilities, through the inventive empathy and cultivated abilities it inspires. It is also an indication of our dependence on art, imagination, and memory for our survival as caring beings.

It remains very hard to accept that Florian Beigel is no longer in the physical realm we call reality. For how could such an architectural shaman be gone when we need him more than ever? In times when the blind and irresponsible belief in man's exclusive right to plunder our living planet has come to a dead-end in irrefutable reactions from a

defiant earth (to use Clive Hamilton's expression)³ we badly need the sovereign integrity and humorous resistance of architects like Beigel to set out paths that can deflect humanity from its kamikaze path. We require his insistence on insightful, caring observation of the existing, and his uncompromising dedication to art, culture, and nature.

Life and architecture were inseparable in the persona of Florian Beigel. If he is gone to a different place, his impact on the people in his path and his outstanding architecture and original thoughts have forever shifted the weight of our steps. Enlightened by his work, fragile but persistent, we might tread a little lighter.

Florian Beigel is survived by his partner Philip Christou, his sister Elisabeth and brother Thomas.

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Notes

1. Chungmoo Choi, 'Transnational Capitalism, National Imaginary, and the Protest Theatre in South Korea', *boundary 2*, 22:1 (1995), 235–61.
2. Peter Smithson, *Conversations with Students* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004).
3. Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (London: Polity, 2017).

Illustration credits

arq gratefully acknowledges: Elizabeth Hatz, 1, 4, 6
Florian Beigel Architects, 2–3, 5