

# James Beckett: Reviews/ mention

CCQ magazine issue7: Published on Aug 24, 2015



Act II, scene II  
[Ric and James are still sitting in their deck-chairs under the tree.  
Katerina's seat is now empty.]

Ric: I can't work out whether *Scenario Generator for Clandestine Building in Africa*, your contribution to the Belgian Pavilion, is essentially optimistic. Or are you co-opting characteristically postmodern vehicles – the computer and the commercial robot – to subvert the dehumanising influence of modernity, to seek out a different path, so to speak?

James: It's a bit of a tongue-in-cheek trick, really, to turn ceremonial and infrastructural modernist African architecture – universities, airports and hospitals – into residential space. Most of the buildings we examined were built between the war and the respective African countries' independence from their colonial occupiers. *The Scenario*

*Generator for Clandestine Building in Africa* proposes brickling in and making private the negative spaces within these buildings. Residential use of these buildings is, of course, absurd. You would never do it. It is more celebration than subversion though. The African buildings we are looking at are fantastic and really varied; from Art Deco in Ethiopia through a number of variations on the International Style, to Israeli architects working in Nigeria. I actually have very little critical personality of modernist architecture; we are just creating faceted portraits of the buildings.

Ric: It feels like the Amazon robots, which you have used in the installation, have been redeemed from their normal societal function, in some way, that is to feed consumer demand. How did your thinking develop to include them?

James: The idea developed out of a conversation with Katerina about

trade. We were referencing a particular Situationist play. I went on to research how the use of ivory in the manufacture of billiard balls transitioned into the use of Bakelite. I wanted to create a device that demonstrated the process of mechanisation in the movement of commodities. Then our conversation shifted to encompass architecture – in fact, the conversation keeps shifting. It is not about appropriating the robots to do something of genuine use, as you were suggesting, but demonstrating that we already have super-efficient machines doing things that are completely ridiculous, like the car, for instance, which is a brilliantly executed, bad idea.

Ric: How does your machine make decisions? Is there an algorithm by which the space within each building is reordered?

James: The program works with data from scans, which is collated

into a database, rather than from a single, universal algorithm. The blocks themselves are derived from Froebel blocks and they represent all the possible dimensional permutations of the reconstructed space, as they get larger they become lighter in colour. Froebel blocks are educational toys that became popular as brainstroming tools for architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and within the Bauhaus. The geometry of each space is represented through a separate vernacular within the different types of blocks.

Ric: Is research in the context of your practice, inherently a collaborative process?

James: Very often, yes. When working with Katerina you get pushed.

It's nice to be pushed.

[Darkness] →

Photo: Sophie Sorensen © Centre for Contemporary Building in Africa James Beckett 2015. Installation view. Photo courtesy of the artist