BRUIT DU FRIGO

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As I write this, the moon is high over Boston and my family is long asleep. The calm is deceptive. Over the past forty-eight hours, since our plane landed from Europe, Valentina and I lugged somewhere around two tons of boxes out of storage and up three flights of stairs; rented a car and had someone ram into it; tried to see our physician and were dismissed for lack of insurance; spent breakfast, lunch, and dinner on hold trying and failing to restart gas, electricity, and oil service; were locked out of our offices for a reason that still eludes us; and were graced with a ticket while trying to get in.

I am so drained that I scroll aimlessly through the news, hoping for a headline that will set my mind on a different track. I have been at this for quite some time and I am now reaching the lower depths – the product recommendation section. *The New York Times* informs me that for 22$ the Green Bell G-1008 clippers would elevate my nail-trimming routine from a chore to a ritual.

There is a French architectural collective called *Bruit du Frigo*. The name refers to a fridge's intestinal gurgling and low humming, the kind of sound you notice only when it

stops. Only now I'm living things in reverse: the fridge has just restarted, and it is deafening. Is this the kind of tedium Wiko had blissfully shielded us from?

Every other institution today prides itself on offering a good work-life balance, especially those that don't. Wiko puts them all to shame. Lunches, dinners, colloquia, wonderful company: working there is – to use a rather tired word aptly for once – delightful. Yet to me what is most special about Wiko is that it is a space of imbalance, one that makes room for obsessiveness and that affords the rare luxury of remaining silent until one has something to say. Last year, I tried something I cannot usually afford to do at work: I closed my lips. And to my amazement, I discovered that I could sometimes hear myself think.

When I joined a management consulting firm after college, I was made to swear by the 80/20 rule: the first 20 % of the time you invest in any project produces 80 % of the result. After that, it is time to move on. I shudder to think about what cultural patrimony we would have inherited had our ancestors abided by such a rule. Apparently, I am not alone. Wiko is an institution so out of tune with the spirit of the times that it stands, in my eyes at least, as a tribute to diminishing returns. It is a place where someone might – just might – have a chance to get to the bottom of something.

I spent much of last year muddling through a book project on the interior architecture of public employment offices. How have these offices changed over time, and why? How should the state greet those who turn to it for assistance? This is a topic that involves spaces that are by all accounts anonymous and generic – spaces about which there seems to be little to say.

Perhaps because they are so dull and unremarkable, public employment offices have left few visual traces, so coming across photographs of them is a minor triumph. One week last spring was particularly auspicious. Browsing through local Danish archives, I found a trove of photographs from the early 1970s. In other circumstances, I would have happily called it a day. Being at Wiko, however, meant that I could seek the advice of a colleague specializing in material culture. On her recommendation, I reached out to design historians and furniture specialists in Denmark. One thing led to another and soon I found myself in Copenhagen speaking to experts at a major auction house who helped me bring the photographs to life by identifying furniture items and tracing their cultural significance at various moments in the long twentieth century.

A few months earlier, I happened to be talking to a Wiko librarian about the Berlin labor exchange, which served as an inspiration for early public employment offices in the

UK and US. I had found short descriptions of it in the English-language literature, including a few grainy images and a first-person account by an American visitor. Enough, I thought, for my purposes. A few days later, a short pamphlet from 1903 appeared on my library shelf. Replete with architectural plans and photographs, it described the space in minute detail. There, I discovered that the exchange contained a cobbler, a tailor, a library, and bath stalls – features that traced its lineage not just to markets for commodities but to journeyman inns and the tradition of hospitality.

One type of desk or another, a cobbler or not: these may be the sorts of details that no one really cares about, the material that remains on the cutting board – the very reason for the 80/20 rule. Yet to me details such as these make all the difference in the world because they offer precious clues as to the social dynamics that took place in these institutions and the aspirations that were invested in them. They explain why spaces that seem to resemble those we have in the present were in fact quite different. And in this gap between past and present, normative questions arise: what should we ask of architecture and what can we reasonably hope from it?

In the memories I keep of last year, Wiko and Berlin have meshed together and become almost indissociable. A place to obsess and a city where, as Valentina once put it to me, you can take on roles without being entirely swallowed by them – a city where you can be an academic and not just an academic; a parent and not just a parent.

I remember one night in particular at Silent Green, seeing Stephen O'Malley play live for the first time. I sensed from the burning sensation in my eyes that I hadn't blinked for an eternity. In front of me, a wall of amplifiers and a guitarist holding one note, then another. Until then, I had thought of music, somewhat naively perhaps, as something I heard with my ears. But here were waves of sound washing over me and passing through me to the person behind. I wasn't hearing sound but bathing in it.

I cannot think of Wiko without thinking of Berlin. But I cannot think of either without the small gestures that made them glow. The smiles with which our Wiko hosts met our most obtuse requests. My neighbor at the Villa Walther, with whom I practiced rolling cigarettes under a Japanese maple tree. That time we had to take our son to the hospital in the middle of the night, only to hear a friendly knock on the door and someone offering us a ride. Or that long, peaceful walk through Marzahn with a photographer friend who never once lifted his camera. As I think of them, and of the place that brought us together, I remember a sentence of Maya Angelou's that I must have read once on a mug or T-shirt: people will forget what you said and what you did but never how you made them feel.

When we were preparing to leave Berlin, our son Emi, who is three and a half, asked me what would happen to "our lake" – the one that our apartment at the Villa Walther overlooked. I answered that we would leave it behind for others to enjoy, but that we would come back every so often to make sure it was well cared for. "Just like a *Spielplatz*?" Yes, I suppose, a *Spielplatz* for adults with a certain temperament.