VISUAL ESSAY

Atlas Altan:
Naïve Architecture of Polish
Allotment Sheds

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According to the Polish Allotment Federation, there are currently almost one million allotments in Poland, meaning that this type of gardening is effectively filling up four million Poles' free time. Allotments are combined in so-called community gardens that often occupy large areas within cities. In the middle of each allotment is a shed to store gardening tools, to serve as a shelter, and sometimes to function as a sort of summer cabin.

Most allotments have been built by their owners from a simple sketch. This absence of professional drawings, finite set of materials, and limited budget is what encourages gardeners' imaginations and enforces their will to express it. The product is an individual and unique architecture that serves its purpose, and in effect is utterly pragmatic. This nonprofessional approach of gardeners to create structures seems to stand in opposition to the scientific attitude of architects. The gardener is the embodiment of a bricoleur, a creator that puts pre-existing things together by which something new is achieved; the gardener thinks while creating.

This process of building without plans or the involvement of building professionals—in effect by self-taught architects—is somehow similar to what we call in history of arts as naïve: where a person without academic training creates a visual art. Therefore, by analogy, we call the architecture of allotment sheds naïve, in its Latin meaning, where nativus means 'native' or 'natural'. Atlas Altan's focus is to recognise this naïve architecture as an object worth documenting, both because of its scale—a phenomenon present in most Polish cities—as well and its impromptu process. Typologically, the sheds are quite similar, and their floor plan is mostly a product of a utilitarian approach. However, where they differ is in their details and materials.

This series of photographs, with an allotment always located in the middle of the frame, tries to represent the mundane and ordinary. It captures the simple surroundings of those who inhabit Polish cities but are often overlooked, focusing on the allotment as unapologetic forms of freedom and expression enclosed in community gardens.