

Lithuanian wood, or how to deconstruct vernacular architecture into a work of art

A conversation on traditional materials, architectural fragments, site specificity and new perspectives found when looking with fresh eyes towards the un-seen.

Heritage is a malleable thing, its meaning always shifting between present use and past significance. Closely tied to notions of identity and place, vernacular architecture is, nonetheless, often at odds in its relationship to contemporary art and architecture practices. But, what happens when these same approaches are used to preserve vernacular tradition? What can we learn about our past if we allow the fragments of history to perform in other contexts? In this interview, Lithuanian artist Augustas Serapinas talks about his relationship with built and un-built heritage, old Lithuanian wooden houses, architectural space and how his point of view gets informed by those of others.

Interviewee [Augustas Serapinas](#)

Interviewer [KoozArch](#)

Published 01 Mar 2023



"Wood and Snow", Augustas Serapinas, exhibition view. In the photo: Part of the House from Skirgiškės, 2022 reclaimed wood, 129.5 x 25 x 20 cm; Shutters from a Unknown House, 2022 reclaimed wood 102 x 85 x 3.5 cm; Part of the House from Skirgiškės, 2022 reclaimed wood, 129 x 18 x 20 cm; Part of the House from Skirgiškės, 2022 reclaimed wood, 82 x 20 x 18 cm. Photo: Ralph Feiner, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tschudi

KOOZ The exhibition *Wood and Snow* at Galerie Tschudi can be seen as a direct continuation of your long-standing interest in the relationship between vernacular architecture and modern monumental sculpture. What informed this interest? How do you approach our built environment?

AUGUSTAS SERAPINAS In 2016, I was in the Fogo Island Arts residency preparing an exhibition. There, I encountered a local shed which was soon to be demolished. Sheds in Fogo are part of local heritage, part of identity. Locals fix boats, salt fish and have shed parties. I reacted to that situation and managed to save the house and turned it into an artwork. I titled it *Four Sheds* because, while dismantling it, I learned from locals that it was altered three times before. In Fogo Island it was common practice to change the purpose of the shed and make alterations. After my experience in Canada, I turned my sight to Lithuania. We have a lot of old abandoned wooden buildings. Unfortunately, old wooden buildings

are mainly protected in city centers and historically significant areas. Otherwise, these buildings are on their own. You can browse online to find such houses on sale for firewood, materials. More buildings are not even listed and just left to decay. In 50 years, when they become scarce, they will officially become a cultural heritage, but not now.



Augustas Serapinas, "Four Sheds", reclaimed woods, nails and wallpaper reassembled from existing shed on Barr'd Islands, Fogo Island.

In most cases, I destroy these wooden buildings myself. Through deconstruction, I show these houses from another perspective.

My first works from Lithuania were made with materials from a house near Prienai. The owner wanted to demolish it but I took it first. Since the house was already roofless and partly rotten, I cut it in pieces, then treated those pieces against bugs and mold and put them on display in exhibitions. Paradoxically, in most cases, I destroy these wooden buildings myself. However, I only take those which I know will be gone anyway. Through deconstruction, I show these houses from another perspective. Parts of wooden walls, windows, roofs—in a way it is all about the beauty of craftsmanship. I find quality in details, patterns, materials, colours. The house turns into sculptures and each sculpture becomes an ambassador for the regional vernacular wooden architecture.



"Wood and Snow", Augustas Serapinas, exhibition view. Remains of the House from Skirgiškės, 2022 reclaimed wood 370 x 480 x 500 cm. Photo: Ralph Feiner, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tschudi

The house turns into sculptures and each sculpture becomes an ambassador for the regional vernacular wooden architecture.

KOOZ Specifically, the exhibition in Zuoz consists of variations of sculptural compositions, built from elements of abandoned and decaying wooden houses which would have otherwise been purchased to be used as firewood. What questions does the exhibition seek to raise and address?

AS I have always been fascinated by space, how it can affect our activities and perception. The same task in two different spaces might have slightly different outcomes. If we had met for this interview at a high-ceiling loft with big windows, our conversation could have gone one way, but if we had the same meeting at a narrow underground tunnel it could have gone another way. This applies also to other things, artworks, for example. The same artwork in two different exhibitions can get different context because of the space's history and the interior, surrounding works. With artworks there is another thing as well—the same work can be installed in a better or worse way. Space and surroundings have a big impact. I always have that in mind while preparing and installing my exhibitions. In some cases, the site and context specificity becomes a big part of the work, but I never neglect the installation itself as well.

There is a volume of elements that speaks about vernacular architecture without showing any architecture.

In Zuoz, I brought wooden houses keeping in mind the Tschudi gallery space itself. All these wooden remains of the houses were brought to highlight the wooden elements of the Tschudi gallery space—a medieval Swiss alpine house in Zuoz. It is a dialogue between two different house building traditions. On the other hand, the exhibition is about Lithuanian wooden houses. There is deliberately no fully assembled house on display, even when we could build not one, but two whole houses if we were to use all the

available pieces. There is a volume of elements that speaks about vernacular architecture without showing any architecture. I am more interested in this particularity and what makes it possible. The show is a review of such elements, their composition and patterns.



"Wood and Snow", Augustas Serapinas, exhibition view. Upper Roof Part of the House from Steponij Village, 2022 charred reclaimed wooden shingle roof 180 x 640 x 340 cm. Photo: Ralph Feiner, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tschudi

KOOZ Beyond the space of the gallery, you very frequently also operate within open public spaces with site specific works. How do the sites in which you operate either as commercial private endeavors or publicly accessible open spaces define the artwork produced and exhibited within these? How do you approach site specificity?

AS Every site, every situation is a unique set of things. I like to enter such situations through local people. I create my view with the help of others. A cleaner at the bank might give more interesting insights than the public relations manager. I titled a lot of artworks after people's names who were essential for their development. Also, sometimes I am interested in hidden spaces. A secret tea room in a business consulting headquarters sounds interesting, especially if it is fully functional and there are people to discover and use it.

I create my view with the help of others.

KOOZ More than immersive works, your practice often engages the audience by redirecting their gaze to the un-built and unseen. How do you deploy your installations to foreground and uncover hidden dynamics of social hierarchy, economy, and memory?

AS I often build my installations by trying to shift between the perspective of the artist and the viewer. That helps me to be aware of the viewer's gaze and construct the works accordingly. I am not sure if I am capable of working towards uncovering hidden dynamics directly through research. I rather notice paradoxes indicating it. It comes with my insights, sometimes mere coincidences.



"Wood and Snow", Augustas Serapinas, exhibition view. House Wall from Didžioji Kuosinė, 2022 reclaimed wood. Photo: Ralph Feiner, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Tschudi

I often build my installations by trying to shift between the perspective of the artist and the viewer.

KOOZ How do you envision your work changing in the near future? Are there specific urgencies and topics which you are keen on focusing on? If so why?

AS I have done a lot of visually different works and it feels nice to be able to work longer on one particular theme. It gives me the opportunity to look more into aesthetics. Having it in mind, I will keep enjoying working on wooden houses a little bit longer, looking for new expressions. And I will do it too with topics I touched before, particularly the gym and snow. But of course, the works related to space and context will not disappear from my practice. It is just harder to talk about it in future tense as it is more about immediate reflection to the given situation rather than pre-constituted ideas.

Bio

Augustas Serapinas (born in 1990, Vilnius, Lithuania; lives and works in Vilnius, Lithuania) completed his BFA at the Vilnius Academy of Arts in 2013. His work was recently included in the RIBOCA2 Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art; the 58th Venice Biennale (2019); the Baltic Triennial 13, Vilnius; and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna. Solo exhibitions have been held at P/////AKT, Amsterdam; Emalin, London; Apalazzo Gallery, Brescia; CURA Basement, Rome; David Dale Gallery, Glasgow; Fogo Island Arts, Newfoundland; and SALTS, Basel.