PRIMARY_HOUSE

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Untitled Space can be seen as a “primary house”, as a categorical statement about what architecture is and what, mutatis mutandis, architecture therefore is not. This occurs in the customary form of a model-specific design for a small country house in which the living situation has been reduced to something so elementary that the house hardly needs to be furnished and things outside are of no significance either. The project presents the same house in different environments. In theory, it could have been in the Alps or the Sahara. Yet it is not a mobile home. It is situated on a slope, although this is barely suggested by the locations chosen. The construction is partly underground, half-submerged in the slope, which in Holland could also have been the body of a dike. Somehow or another, it is anchored in the ground. The house is founded in a certain, almost Romantic way.[1] The fact that this aspect has barely been developed in the presentation must have been, with such a studious project, just as deliberate as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s brick country house from 1924, which for half a century was seen as a progressive and dynamic open floor plan evolved from De Stijl that generated a great space on an infinitely vast ground, and could just as easily have been located “somewhere else”, while in fact it represents a few classic, picturesquely positioned pavilions united by a sloping terraced landscape with wall planes on that site in Babelsberg[2]. The design would otherwise be incomprehensible; perhaps spatial but not logical. If the base is just omitted from the presentation like that, everything simply floats away. People enjoy that. But far from being a presentation trick, in both cases the absent base is in the first place an architectonic definition.
But what kind of definition? While the technical drawings (0151, *Untitled Space 2.0*) show a basement, ground floor and an upper storey, the basement is dug out so deeply on one side that the ground there can be walked on outside as well. Consequently, it is possible to have two front doors opposite each other at the ends of the long, narrow landing, but on different storeys. Because the doors are at storey level, the basement door on the one side of the house is lower than the one on the ground floor on the other side. However, this difference as such has little significance because a basement is of course usually lower, but in this case it has even less significance because the storeys in this project become higher towards the top. The house does not have a classic tripartite elevation of low ground floor, high first floor and lower upper floor – an elevation that can in principle be infinitely high like a system sunk into itself. It’s the opposite here: the higher the storey is situated in the house, the taller it becomes, so that such an open system of storey layers actually becomes finite. It is an indication of the “primary character” of this primary house, which is finite and helplessly locked in itself. The definition of an increasingly higher storey height, if it is a definition at all, must be derived from Pugin, who in his *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* points out that the sloping tops of a buttress’ recesses, for example, must increase in pitch as they go upwards in order to still be noticed, with the consequence that

this architectonic detail, the buttress and its recesses and slanting top, simply disappear the further they go upwards, except, says Pugin, if you look at the object from a distance.[3] But it is not from a distance that we observe buildings. Why should we?

And why not? Pugin's observation is, in its turn, an aesthetic or design-specific elaboration – an instrumentalization – of Immanuel Kant's description of the sublime in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. I have never been to Egypt, writes Kant, but a friend of mine has, and what is striking about the pyramids is that from nearby you do see the size, but not the form, and from a distance you see the form but not the size. So in essence you cannot really see them or, at any rate, cannot form an impression of them.[4] Although the sublime as paradox had already become a basic category of picturesque landscape architecture in the eyes of empirical philosophy, it hardly led to an architectonic definition of design, with the exception of the apparently mutually exclusive, and hence also mutually negating, extension of various things across the same space (*apparent extent*[5]), which is repeated in *Untitled Space* to such a degree that the project completely absorbs, by means of view and reflection, the view of every space of landscape no matter where this may be, without revealing its own base. Without being depicted that way, it is merely a point in a landscape. This landscape is easily turned into part of the project. All that is still connected to aesthetic perception as a category in itself. The question, however, is to what extent does this perception then play a role in determining an architectonic form. In the photographic presentation, it is only present technically, as something which simply exists, a "natural" perspective, while in the geometric dimensioning of the plan and section, the view is kept at an infinite distance. What is striking about Pugin's definition, however, is that if you assume that the pitch of a buttress' recess is connected to rain water drainage, then it could have been horizontal if there were no rain and would never have been visible from close up on the ground. It is only visible because it has been bevelled due to the fact that it rains occasionally. It is therefore only an architectonic element because it rains and because it can be observed from close up, and it can only be observed from close up because it rains. Or snows. But it also means that its pitch has to increase as it moves upwards in order to still be perceived as an architectonic element, with the result that the higher the recess, the steeper the pitch, to the point that it is so steep it is vertical, disappearing into the buttress and the architectonic element is no longer present. As an edge, it never completely disappears, but it is no longer visible to the naked eye. The recess of the buttress therefore develops into two progressions as it moves upwards: the higher it is, the more a natural, optically uncorrected, consistent or "functional" drainage bevel disappears from view; on the other hand, the higher it is, the steeper the bevel has to become in order to still be observed as an architectonic element, until it reaches the point where it is so steep that it also disappears from view. In both cases, the architectonic element in question disappears as it moves upwards. You could also say that such an element is therefore determined by height. The nice thing about Pugin's definition is that an architectonic object is certainly there for a reason, but that it is observed on the basis of other reasons, if it is observed at all, and it develops on the basis of these other reasons, in this case the earth's surface, which has no connection to the reason why the architectonic object has been designed the way it was. The perception is, in a way, coincidental because it depends on the position of the observer, but for the construction that is yet to be built it also means that the space upon which an observer with a given height finds him/herself is of no consequence. Buildings such as those found in English Neo-Gothicism in the middle of the nineteenth century rise from the ground without skirting or pronounced basement, like a mushroom.[6] In this way, the difference in form made by an architectonic element, or the possibility of differentiation from it – the design concept – can be found in its disappearance as it moves upwards instead of in its genesis from below, proceeding from the foundation of a functional stacking of materials, because such an element when viewed from below changes, but in theory, when viewed from above – if the base is understood to be something artificial – the element does not change. If we look downwards, then all of a buttress' recesses have the same pitch for water drainage because there is no visual reason for differentiation. If we look upwards, then all the recesses have another, mutually different pitch for water drainage, to the point that the entire pitch, and therefore also the whole element, disappears. The differentiation of the form or, you could say, its concept, therefore emanates from the height and not the depth. It does change as it moves upwards, but not downwards. The building has not been built from the bottom upwards but, on the other hand, it is not suspended from the sky either since the architectonic element in fact disappears as it moves upwards. The differentiation of this element is determined ex negativo by the height factor. It was an assault on the frontal system of the Renaissance perspective, in favour of a furtive, oblique view as basis for design. The nice thing is that the frontal Renaissance perspective, a perception of a built object in a transparent visual space in which that built object does not change but stays the same when looked at and, according to Pugin, is only applicable underground, located somewhere in the ground where the material does not have to be differentiated by a design that can be seen.

August Pugin also established his definition of perspective, which was extremely important for the development of architecture, in a famous drawing in which the view cones from the vantage point of an observer converge with the architectonic elements seen. It is a building's construction that determines the perspective, not the other way round. Like in a spider's web, people are hanging on a building that they can only see because it happens to be there. The perception becomes intentionally or almost phenomenologically related to the design of a building.[7] The result is that the space or the natural ground from which such a building rises but perhaps also expands is actually irrelevant. By only looking upwards and thus not perceiving the immediate space around the country house – incidentally, in *Untitled Space* that space is hardly specified in the technical drawings: plan, section and elevation – you don't see any objects that you would visit in the same open space where you are situated if you look the other way, but an inner structure that wanted to translate itself mentally. The primary aspect of this primary house was, as a categorical definition of architecture, from the outset conceived as a *Gestalt*, as a mental image. That is how it has been designed. That's why the photo reportage emphasizes that the different landscapes where the project could be located are recognizable. The same goes for the furniture. In fact, there is not a great deal of furniture, but none of it is unrecognizable. They are unmistakably recognizable. If a piece of furniture threatens to become unrecognizable because of its form or especially because of the emphasis on its form, then it is provided with an object that makes the function clear, such as the toilet spray on the cistern in *Untitled Space 06 02*. The relation of such a piece of furniture to its object is vertical, as is the case with the quite old-fashioned telephone on the small cabinet in *Untitled Space 07 02*. The connection is allegorical. It indicates that the floor which supports the furniture in this project has a moral or ethical tenor. The objects – in this case usually white or plain – on the pieces of furniture are meaningful but far from moralizing. If anything, their meaning creates a banal effect. The floor on which the furniture is placed, as with the crash helmets in *Untitled Space 08 02*, provides additional commentary.

But what kind of commentary? It is striking that the viewing position in the photographic presentation is always close-up and not from a distance. With the exception of *Untitled Space 08 01* (Hoogovenkanaal), whose entrance is on the ground floor when viewed from outside – incidentally without the ground being visible; if it had been visible at all, then it would have been removed from view by the reflection of the water surface of the Hoogovenkanaal – the view is not frontal but diagonal. Furtive. A cross-view, resulting in a "natural" bowtie perspective à la René Daniels. The project flutters a little around its perspective. In so doing, an interior perspective is consistently drawn downwards, while the outside is drawn upwards. As if, when inside under a ceiling, you logically look downwards, and outside you look upwards. There is, therefore, a difference between inside and outside. Outside, people look up, inside they look down. Inside, people look at the floor, on which everything is placed. The floor therefore has to have significance. Captured in pictures, the difference between inside and outside is an iconographic difference. But typically for architecture, it is nevertheless difficult to interpret in a special case such as this because the same country house design could have been portrayed in the opposite way, with the outside perspectives moving downwards and upwards towards the ceiling in the interior. Or with only an outside perspective and no interior. After all, the country house is transparent. You see it from the outside anyway. In terms of the architectonic idea, there is no reason to differentiate between the outside and inside in the presentation. The difference between the outside and inside should not be sought in an architectonic idea depicting the difference between outside and inside, but in something else that is indicated by it. (Interpretation in architecture is difficult because this art should remain abstract and implied, giving a realistic presentation like this, with air, landscape and furniture, something sensual, something indicative with regard to the probable meaning of the impenetrable building.)

You could say that an obtrusive, intimate perspectival perception as is emphatically presented in *Untitled Space* is in fact intended to make the building seem so exaggeratedly transparent from all sides, both from the inside and the outside, that the thought of something as non-transparent as the earth's surface simply does not come to mind any more.

From the front door, the stairs immediately lead downwards, not up. If the ground floor were at ground level, then it would be denied immediately behind the front door. If you enter the country house through the front door at the level of the earth’s surface, then you immediately face a yawning chasm. Stairs leading to the almost Marc-Dutroux-like cellar that is hardly portrayed in the photo reportage. If you entered via the cellar door on the other side, then a perspective may have unfolded of the stairs leading up to the ground floor and the front door. That perspective is thwarted by the continuation downstairs of the side-walls of the long, narrow staircase leading upstairs, which is actually not needed downstairs, in terms of construction. Both staircases become lighter towards the top, but the shorter, heavier cellar stairs near the front door do so more than the stairs that lead from the ground floor to the first storey.

No further distinction is made between the heavy *Tiefbau* of the basement and the lighter *Hochbau* of the upper storeys with regard to dimensions and expression. Gottfried Semper’s dialectics of stereometry and tectonics has been omitted. By placing it one third into the ground, the access via the staircase forms a closed, non-extendable system. From the ground floor, one staircase leads upwards and another downwards. They rise and descend in the same direction, but not as extensions of each other. Without any other change to the design, a stairwell could have been created – stairs in extension of each other with a landing in between it – but the opposite solution was opted for. The stairs are located in the same zone approximately in the middle of the house’s length, but inside this zone they are located as far away from each other as possible, according to a net or swastika pattern in terms of height, (*Untitled Space 2.0,* section zz), with the consequence that the four rooms at the corners will be subjected to a relatively large amount of traffic. The difference is two storeys instead of one. The system of stairs determines the whole house in a nutshell. The landing in the centre, that had connected both staircases on another flight, floats in the middle of the house like a small ground-floor bridge, like a dagger-thrust thought the staircase, like a stairless diminuation of the house in its core, like an unborn baby, a new generation of such houses of desire.

If *Untitled Space*, approximately eleven metres wide and seventeen metres long and spread across three storeys, is clearly not a small house – then the staircase certainly turns it into that. With the required length of the stairs, which do extend into each other in the plan – a continuous flight of stairs has still been retained as a possibility in the plan – three small landings remain on the ground floor in the zone of the staircase: next to the bridge in the centre, one at the top of the cellar stairs and one at the bottom of the stairs leading to the upper storeys. The first two are approximately one and a half square metres, the last is a little more than half of that. The latter two are at opposite sides of the building’s façade. The diminution of the landings at the bottom of the stairs to the next storey indicates that the building cannot be smaller within this system. The house is so big because it can’t be smaller. That’s why it is a small house.

It’s not the size that makes a house a primary house in architecture, but the definition of size, the compelling position of the stairs or, more generally, the vertical access and auxiliaries such as hallways, steps and landings that are added. The reason for this is most likely that in the past fifty years it has no longer been possible to establish a connection between the living space and stairs, not after a representation of living in architecture – as could be found with Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and Heinrich Tessenow’s Hausbau und dergleichen in 1916 – has all but disappeared. In the photo reportage of *Untitled Space* it is made clear that architectonic means in themselves are no longer sufficient now for the depiction of living; there is a view, a reflection of which is occasionally shown in the glass façade, and there are accessories depicting a certain kind of living (a football, a bicycle, a cistern) that finds no other expression in this architecture. The presence of these objects only supports a kind of self-evident assumption that architecture can appear reduced, and that within this reduction – taken far in this case – a kind of differential idea of what architecture is or might be can merely be formulated by the irregularity of the distribution of the glass panels. The difficulty for architecture in general is that a purely technical presentation of such a differentiated glass façade in a plan, section and elevation would not be convincing or at least not discussed here without added elements like the landscape and furniture, which project a reality. It does have to seem real. At the same time, it is probably not the intention that living or a view in itself should tell a story for which the architecture simply serves as a frame narrative. For this, landscape and furniture are too interchangeable and the glass, with its jazzy rhythm, no matter how reduced, is too differentiated. A narration of natural things with differentiation of architecture. In a certain sense, everything revolves around the proportioning of the glass, which is reinforced by a basically senseless continuation of this proportioning in the floor – they are the same seams – as a result of which it is not determined by definition alone whether this dimensioning is determined in the floor and subsequently is continued vertically or vice versa. In view of the fact that here the project’s only planned overdetermination, you could also say compulsion, can be found, one might assume that this concerns a negative design, originating from the absurd, in which the only goal is to avoid a definition of form. If the floor had had its own proportioning, separate from the façade, then it would have started to float and its height would be indeterminate. It would be released from the façade and obtain a random height within the façade enclosure which would function as a kind of lift shaft. The emphasis would be placed on the fact that the ground surface outside is not reflected, so that the height of the different landscapes can actually never be determined. That is why the height of the floor would remain undetermined if a connection was not made with the proportioning of the façade. This in turn means that the proportioning of the façade would have to be unclear. The dimensioning of the glass is therefore not based on the glass itself; it hangs on the glass, just as it lies on the floor. Nevertheless, the question remains why architecture needs these outside things in its representation. A house is introduced in a landscape, but the same house can also be depicted in another landscape – and will be – with the consequence that then it is not a particular landscape contributing to a categorical definition of architecture but the category of landscape in general. The specific reduction of this architecture leads, for the benefit of its definition, back to a generalized reduction of landscape to landscape tout court and of the accessories to a kind of living, as it happens to be or seems to be. The Noordzeekanaal or the football cannot be denied, but here they have no iconography or interpretation. For the benefit of architecture, the meaning of the decorating elements has been purloined. Still, there is a methodological difficulty, or in fact the aim of the project: the special quality of architecture is substantiated on the basis of a universality of all the things that do not belong to it. Things that are part of it but do not belong to it, and in this sense are actually only tolerated, such as a view or a piece of furniture are tolerated by the architect who actually did not design them. While on stage the foreground always has a function in the build-up of a scene, not only in the composition of it, as in this project, but also iconographically as a vehicle for meaning, reference or perspective, something that provides the illusory spatial picture of a real, banal space, like a kind of amendment to the illusion – because of course the illusory space of the performance is simultaneously a real space – in *Untitled Space #05-08* the coherence is in the form of a narrative but without narration.

Since architecture in this sense is not totalitarian but permits other things, the question remains whether and to what extent we should interpret it as a partial system of reality itself – that of landscapes, furniture, clothing, etc. And to what extent a football or a landscape should then be seen as an attribute of such architecture anyway. Because who determines that this universality of furniture does not belong to architecture? Here, this universality is not determined by the designers of furniture or footballs but by the architect. Still, the gap, historically and in practice, between architecture as an abstract construction on the one hand and the design of furniture and landscape on the other, is continuously bridged in real life.

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[1] "The Eighteenth Century preferred more regular sites than this and the Post-Romantic Revivalists preferred hilltops to the cliff edges or shelves of the Romantics (Frank Lloyd Wright, that great Romantic, prefers shelves or hillsides)": Philip Johnson, *Writings*. Foreword by Vincent Scully, Introduction by Peter Eisenman, Commentary by Robert A. M. Stern (New York: Oxford University Press) 1979, 216.

[2] Wolf Tegethoff, *Mies van der Rohe. The Villas and Country Houses*. Translated by Russell M. Stockman, edited by William Dykes (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 37-51.

[3] "Another important consideration to mouldings, and by which their profile should in a great measure be regulated, is the position in which they are placed with relation to the eye of the spectator. The slope of weatherings themselves is determined by this principle, the pitch increasing with the height that they are placed from the ground. Were this not attended to, the upper water table would be lost to a spectator, unless he was at a considerable distance from the building": A[ugust] Welby Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture.* A reprint of the first edition with a foreword by Marina Henderson (London: Academy Editions, 1973), 17-18.

[4] "... da_ man den Pyramiden nicht sehr nahe kommen, eben so wenig als zu weit davon entfernt sein müsse, um die ganz Rührung von ihrer Größe zu bekommen. Denn ist das letztere, so sind die Teile, die aufgefa_t werden (die Steine derselben übereinander), nur dunkel vorgestellt, und ihre Vorstellung tut keine Wirkung auf das ästhetische Urteil des Subjekts. Ist aber das erstere, so bedarf das Auge einige Zeit, um die Auffassung von der Grundfläche bis zur Spitze zu vollenden; in dieser aber erlöschen immer zum Teil die ersteren, ehe die Einbildungskraft die letzteren aufgenommen hat, und die Zusammenfassung ist nie vollständig": Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1957), § 26.

[5] "No villa should see any other, but each should appear to possess the whole of the park": John Nash, cited in John Summerson, *The Life and Work of John Nash Architect* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 70

[6] Lord Grimthorpe, cited in *Seven Victorian Architects. William Burn, Philip Charles Hardwick, Sydney Smirke, J.L. Pearson, G.F. Bodley, Alfred Waterhouse, Edwin Lutyens*. Edited by J. Fawcett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 125.

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[7] In this sense, representation for Pugin is also almost scholastically interpreted like an attribute of a building and it points to a structure of perception "... nach der alle Gegenstände, auf die sich ein Erlebnis bezieht, zugleich in ihm enthalten sind": Herbert Spiegelberg, "'Intention' und 'Intentionalität' in der Scholastik, bei Brentano und Husserl", *Studia philosophica. Jahrbuch der schweizerischen philosophischen Gesellschaft*, Band XXIX, Recht und Gesellschaft (Basel: Schweizerische philosophische Gesellschaft, 1969), 206.

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