

JOHN HEJDUK

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Susanne Ghez
Director of Exhibitions

JOHN HEJDUK by Franz Schulze One wants naturally enough to begin an examination of John Hejduk's architecture by referring to a typical project. It is difficult to find one, however, since the difference between the earliest pieces on view in this exhibition and the latest is figuratively comparable to the distances that separate them in space (Texas and Venice) and in time (the 1950s and the 1970s). The first house of the Texas series is abstract, general, formal: no specific site or client is indicated, and Hejduk offers us no effigy of it except the sparest, most spidery drawing rendered with an exceedingly hard pencil. It is called simply House Number One. The Thirteen Watch Towers of Cannaregio, on the other hand, are given exacting title and location. Not only do they rely on metaphor, they are accompanied by a program both literary and poetic in character, and they are shown in the form of a three-dimensional, colored model that invites associations with surrealism. Yet Hejduk presents a credible argument that the two works are part of an integrated architectural whole, stops on a shared line, passages in a unified narrative that unfolds over the years as if it had been conceived as a drama.

Let us then hold onto the idea of working from an exemplar, and choose a project that falls chronologically about halfway between the Texas houses and the Venetian towers. For the moment, let us further confine ourselves to the way Hejduk presents the work in drawn form.

The Bernstein house of 1966 is rendered in pointed defiance of centrilinear perspective. No orthogonals recede to any vanishing point, but rather move explicitly parallel to the picture margin, implicitly parallel to the picture plane. Diagonals appear only if they describe, literally, diagonals in the plan or in the elevation. In other words, no concession is made to the Brunelleschian principle of rational illusionistic space. A sense, as distinct from an illusion, of three-dimensional form is conveyed, but so is the stern insistence on the flatness and frontality of the drawn image. The initial encounter with these drawings and others by Hejduk, who consistently approaches them this way, may bring to mind Cézanne's manner of compressing dense volumes into a resistantly shallow space with a resultant tension between two- and three-dimensional form. Or it may recall the whole concept in modern painting of flatness, of "truth to the medium," especially as it is related in the writings of Clement Greenberg.

Either association in Hejduk's case is legitimate, though qualified and modified by his personal architectural concerns. In a conversation of October 1980 he said: "I believe that architecture is flat, that its essences are made up of flat conditions. I do not believe architects when they say they 'see things three-dimensionally.' When Palladio was working on a plan, he worked on it as a plan; when he worked on the elevation, he conceived it as an elevation. Architecture, in other words, is made up of two-dimensional data. That is how you see a room when you are in it. You are in a space, but the space is defined by walls, each discrete, only together making up the illusion of three-dimensionality. The essence beneath the surface of that illusion is the plane. If you cling to the illusion as opposed to the essence, you are missing what Mondrian called reality. He was right when he said that until architects realize this, they will be working 'expressionistically, naturalistically.'

"I have only lately, maybe in the last month, begun to get this all together. I am beginning to be able to think three-dimensionally two-dimensionally. I can now understand, and it is necessary that I understand, three-dimensionally in terms of the medium I work in, which is the plane of the paper on which I draw and define and develop an architectural idea.

"You look at a Mies drawing, then you look at a Mies model, then at a Mies building. You know what? They are exactly the same; *exactly*. There is no difference between them, no seams; they are all the same phenomenon. I find that beautiful. It is true of Corb [LeCorbusier] too. What Mies and Corb do stands for a unity of concept, medium, realization.

"Of course the idea of two-dimensionality/three-dimensionality is a paradox: something that is both two-dimensional and three-dimensional and can only be less than itself if it is not both at once. The notion of the drawing as an illusion of the building—Brunelleschian perspective—is so far as I am concerned antiquated. By the way, you realize, don't you, that architects, builders, that is, built buildings from, that is to say, after—following—these illusionistic drawings! I think that's wild!

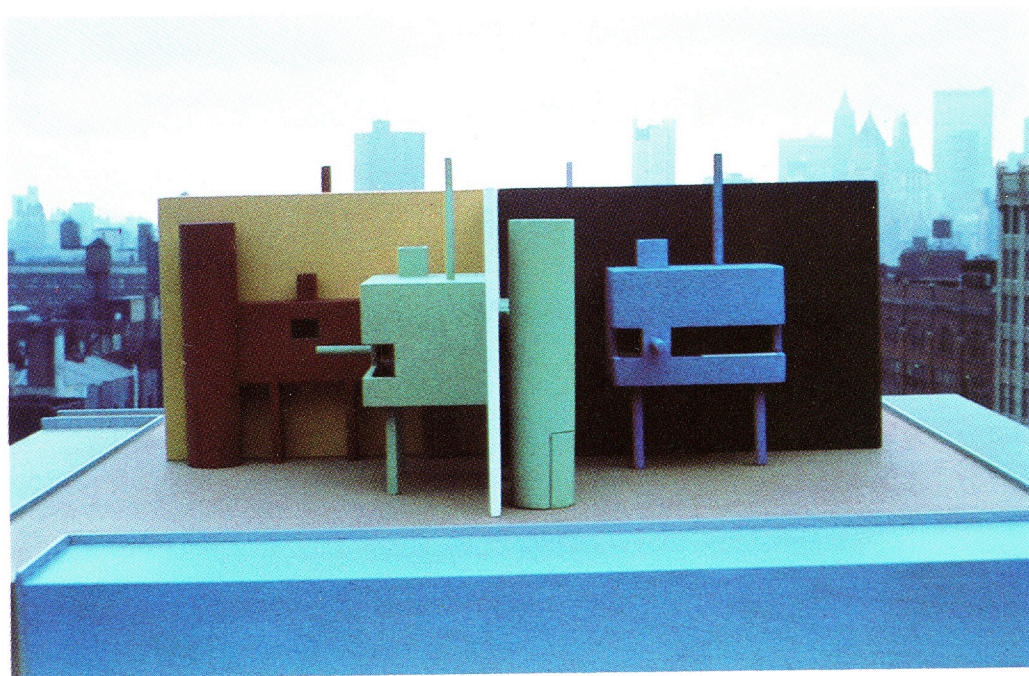
"For much the same reason I abhor the current vogue of showing architectural drawings like art objects, in galleries, as if they were paintings. The drawings are the buildings, or they should be, if the truth of the paradox is to hold. They should be inseparable from the buildings, even if the buildings are never actually built.

"And this reminds me that I am also interested in much the same way in materials, in the materiality of architecture, in saying something about materiality in a special way. When you examine a tub of butter, it has a surface as well as bulk. The butter has a surface, which is smooth and planar. But when you cut into it, the butter is also there, in the depth of the tub. Same butter. I want to evoke that duality; I want to make a material like granite *exude* itself, like the butter down deep along with the butter on the smooth top. *It's a matter of density*. That's another paradox: the paradox of materiality, and it goes hand in hand with the paradox of dimensionality."

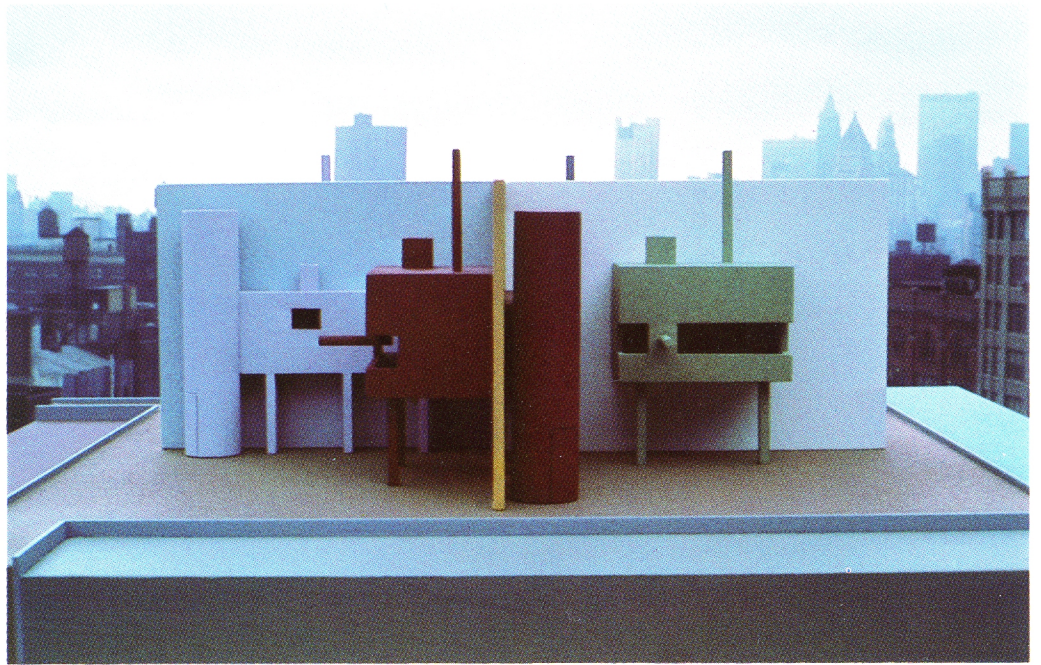
The point of citing these remarks is not necessarily to affirm the rightness of them, or their neatness and clarity. Hejduk is not always clear. But this is how he talks; it suggests his concerns, his way of dealing with them, the way he thinks about architecture. And it helps to advance the aforementioned proposition that Texas is connected logically, and dramatically, with Venice.

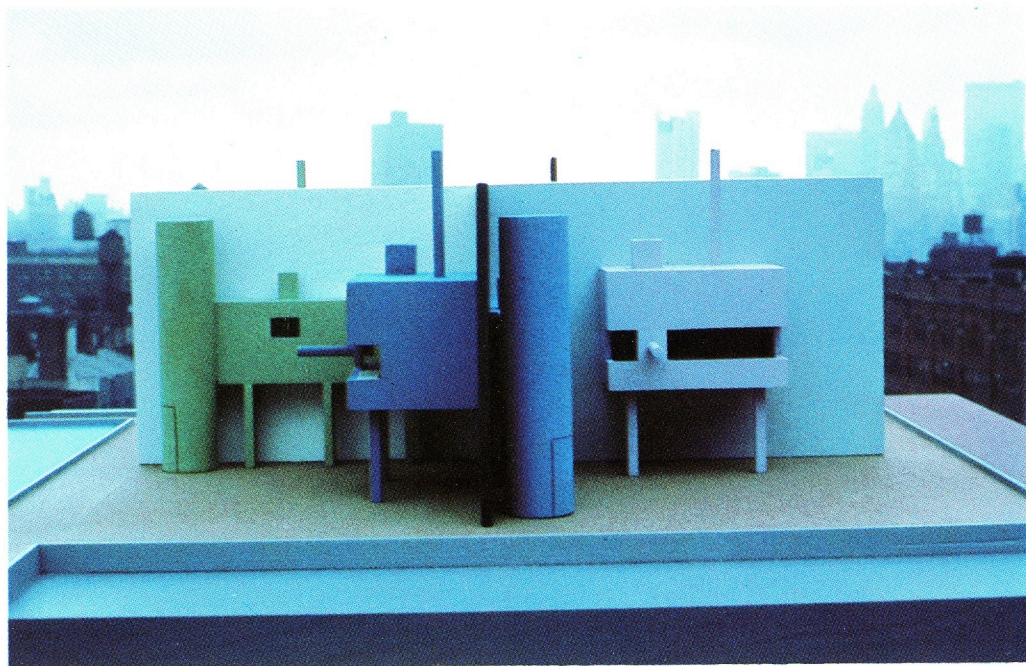
"The one really new thing I did, newer than the flat projection drawings, is the wall house." (In the Bye house of 1968, an example of the several projects to which he gave the name wall house, Hejduk separated a stack of rooms from the circular staircase that serves them; between the two elements he inserted a free-standing flat wall, which touches neither the room-stack nor the staircase, but through which one must pass to go from one to the other.)

Hejduk continues: "The quintessential spatial experience is *going through the wall*. You move through an articulated space when you go through a wall, which suggests yet another paradox, or maybe just another manifestation of the first paradox of two-dimensionality/three-dimensionality. For the wall is flat; yet you move *through* it. It is the plane that provides the spatial experience. That is why the wall is

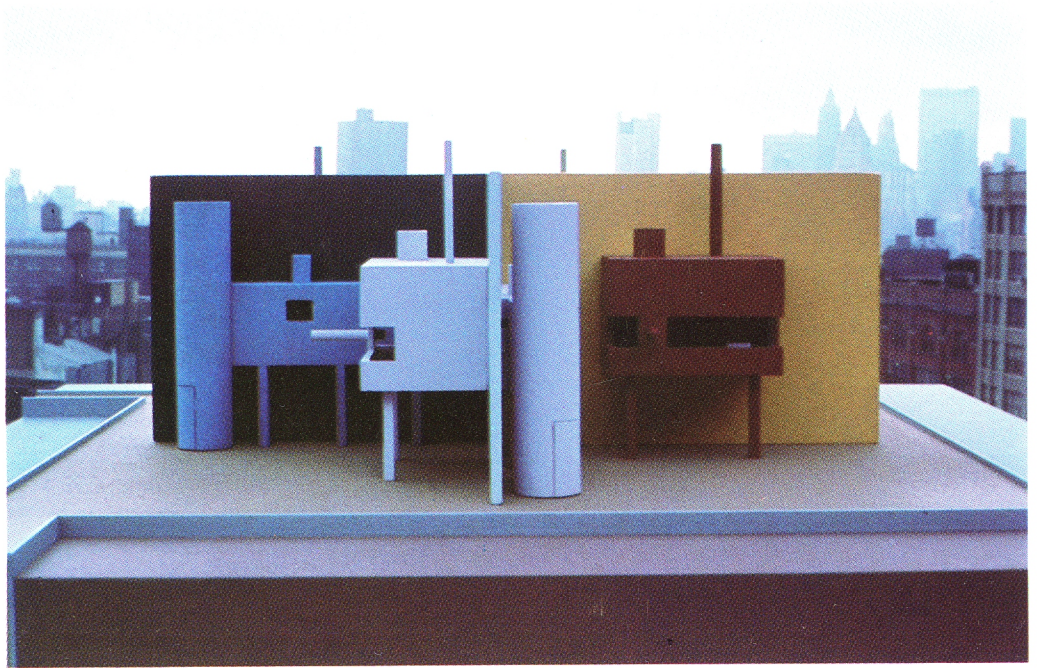


North





West



South

made to stand by itself, so that this fundamental architectural experience can be isolated, heightened."

At this point in the conversation it was remarked to Hejduk that nearly all he had so far said bore out the frequent references among critics to his preoccupations, early in his career, with what they have called "the language of architecture," or the "first principles" of the building art, or some such term connotative of a dedicatedly formalist approach. Peter Eisenman, writing in the catalog of Hejduk's 1980 exhibition of the Texas houses at New York's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, traces this attitude to a traditional disposition of modernism. "Its [modernism's] primary focus was to isolate the internal structure of the art; it turned inward to the discipline itself to what could be called 'work on the language.' "

What then are we to make of the Watchtowers of Cannaregio, so strange, so forbidding, so stunningly different in all outward aspects from the hermetically formalist Texas houses? The towers date from 1979, and like all but a handful of Hejduk's work (his Demlin house of 1960 in Locust Valley, New York, his Hommel apartment of 1969 in New York City and his renovation of the interior of the Cooper Union Foundation Building in New York City of 1975), they are unbuilt. Indeed they could not be built, for reasons inferable from their program, to wit:

Thirteen stucco-covered towers, each 96 feet high, containing one room per floor, are meant to be erected side by side in a Venetian piazza, or campo. A small wall house would stand across from them. Hejduk goes on: "The City of Venice selects thirteen men; one for each tower for life-long residency. One man lives in one tower, and only he is permitted to inhabit and enter his tower. A fourteenth man is selected to inhabit the small house located in the campo. . .

"Upon the death of one of the tower inhabitants, the man in the campo house takes his place and another is selected to inhabit the campo house. . .

"Somewhere in another part of the city overlooking some other campo there is a house inhabited by one who refused to participate. In that campo stands a 6' x 6' x 72' stone tower. . . Cell #7 [of the house] is empty. . . At the exact level of the 'Participant of Refusal's' empty cell there is affixed upon the campo tower a mirror, the precise elevation size of the opposite cell. When the inhabitant of the house stands in his empty room he simply reflects himself upon the mirror of the opposite tower.

"Any citizen is permitted to climb the ladder and enter the stone tower. Once in the tower the citizen can see the lone inhabitant across the campo within his cell. The citizen is looking through the opposite side of the mirror which reflects the house inhabitant. It is a one way mirror. The citizen can observe without being observed."

If this is architecture, it is a most curious kind, that virtually gives off a scent. Associations are evoked, and images, memories, uneasy anticipations. The towers are a metaphor for alienation, psychic imprisonment and spiritual entropy, as if Hejduk through the medium of building were seeking to communicate even as much as a world view, remarking on the isolation of man not only from the modern community but from himself. Kafka comes to mind, or the films of Resnais. Whatever is

suggested, it seems undeniable that these haunting objects are closer in spirit to poetry and painting than to the "language of architecture" which had preoccupied Hejduk twenty years earlier.

That is all right with him, who, while retaining his aforementioned reverence for Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe and the abstract order they stood for, is at present busy with an exploration of building that carries deeply into the realm of other, more saliently figurative, imagistic or narrative arts. In response to the question "Whom do you specially admire among the architects of today?", he answers forthrightly, "Writers. American writers particularly, of the generations in their 30s, 40s, 50s. Poets like John Ashbery, writers like Jay Fellows and John Hawkes." Of them he has written: "There is a density about the work of these men; that is, some kind of opacity moves from their depths to the observer. There is a quality of light from behind that comes through a non-transparent surface or tableau."

Since we are by now swimming in the waters of association, these words bring to mind Hejduk's earlier simile of the tub of butter, in which he affirmed his concern for density, his intention to use a material so that it exudes itself, or as he says of the poets he admires, an "opacity [that] moves from their depths to the observer." There is no easy way to illustrate how Hejduk achieves these elliptically expressed metaphorical ends in an art as presumably concrete as building. How does his poetry transcend into architecture? Perhaps it does not, fully; perhaps that is its uniqueness. His buildings in fact are not all that concrete, having not been built so much as thought about. Much of his architecture, then, especially the late work, is part poetry; at the very least and most obvious, it is conceptual. Whatever this hybrid expression of architecture and reflection, it is also easily enough given to symbolizing or addressing issues of a political nature. The loneliness and tormenting spiritual incarceration bespoken by the Towers of Cannaregio refer clearly to a social condition, from which it is but a short step in thought to a political condition.

Hejduk acknowledges that the Cannaregio project stood for an "architecture of pessimism," but he insists he is optimist enough to be deeply concerned with the use of his art to advance the realization of a humane society, of a "communitas." His art, it must be reaffirmed, is now a hybrid expression, not merely inspired by but composed of more expressive elements than actual buildings. He has busied himself most recently with a "trilogy of houses based on the idea of *masque*." Theater thus joins, or joins up with, poetry in joining up with architecture. "Masque is theater," he says, "and ritual theater has been intimately related to the historic regulation of the social structure. Theater is a manifestation, which is capable of keeping society balanced, and that is the point of *communitas*. In theater we can begin to undertake an investigation of the phenomena on which our present society rests. We can ask such questions as 'Is a hospital good, an acceptable instrument, as we conceive it today, by which the ends of society are reached?' 'Is a school acceptable?' 'Is a high rise?' Architecture is touched, transformed, by such study, thus inextricably connected to it." Since architecture relies on program, Hejduk would hold that program involves vastly more than mute bricks and mortar: it necessarily implies concept, world view. Hence his devotion to thought outside architecture, to arts

other than architecture. "Sassetta," he says, "has density. So has Ingres, so has Vermeer. Vermeer has materiality. Aldo Rossi's design for the cemetery at Modena—his early one, not the one that was built—had a Sassetta sense. One learns to forward the ends of architecture by seeing how they have been so wonderfully and equivalently achieved by painters like these. Or by poets like the ones I mentioned."

Hejduk, then, once given to the closest examination of the "language of architecture," is now no less passionately exploring the architecture of language. Such a formulation would again mark the distance between Texas and Venice, though as observed earlier, Hejduk believes his work has traversed that distance, not simply vaulted it in a single leap. "To begin with," he says, "all architecture is program. In the Texas houses the program was a formal ideal. I wanted to learn about structure and detail, in the abstract. In Cannaregio I wanted to say something about the dilemmas of being human, now, today. I have written poetry in between. I started with no man, I ended with a man; no—I went on to *men*—to the *communitas*."

From the study of a formal abstraction Hejduk has moved progressively to a comment on a psychological condition, thence to reflections on social and political questions. He has said of the wall houses, which occurred midway between Texas and Venice—in the 1960s—that they are, in addition to being an architectural fact devolving on spatial experience, a psychological metaphor. In the figurative sense, "walls are something we encounter throughout our lives," which would lead readily to the inference that the towers of Cannaregio are the social extensions of that wall metaphor.

There is little reason to quarrel with the standardly accepted view that advanced architecture in the 1970s and early 1980s has shown as inclination to concern itself less with actual building commissions and urban plans and more with conjectural, theoretical and speculative design—to withdraw, as it were, from the marketplace to the mind. Such a proclivity is hardly unprecedented; it is enough to remind ourselves of instances as old as Piranesi's *Carceri* prints and the fantastic schemes of Boulleé and Ledoux in the late 18th century. John Hejduk is not the first conceptual architect nor, in view of what we have said here, only that. He is not even *only* an architect, which fact is one of the chief burdens of these remarks. At 51, working professionally in an art form that is famous for stimulating its practitioners to be fruitful until late in life, he must be presumed to have enough time ahead of him that retrospective summations are altogether premature at this time. Moreover, the fecundity of his ideas and the mercuriality of his temperament only further discourage carving any generalizations in stone. The principal purpose of this exhibition is to illuminate rather than elucidate the work of a man whose central interest to us must be in the audacity and courage of his efforts to fly flat out into the dark, to take the architectural experience further in some respects than it has ever gone, to compress it inward upon itself while exploding it, no less forcefully outward, to other fields of endeavor.

CATALOGUE

1. Texas House #1
2. Three Diamond Projects
3. Grandfather House
4. Bernstein House
5. Bye House-Wall House #3
6. Silent Witness Model
7. North-East-West-South House
8. Cannaregio Drawings and Prints
9. Masque #3

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