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Senses of scale: iconicity and instrumentality through the three scales of House 11a in Cannaregio

Introduction

Scale is usually responsible for establishing a dialogue with the user, the place, and the function of the project based on its proportions. Furthermore, *it is entrusted for* being able to establish a logic correspondence between the project and the physical world through its dimensions. Therefore, playing with scale can be a way of questioning some limitations imposed to architecture, such as its reference point and also its function – does architecture necessarily need to be attached to a user or a program? If it does not, how to detach architecture from this determinacy while still practicing architecture?

These are key points for Peter Eisenman's Cannaregio Town Square, designed in 1978 for Venice. In this project, the critique of the architectural dictates takes place largely through the incorporation of a previous work, House 11a, also from 1978, when scaled to three different sizes. In this paper, we discuss about how scale engages directly with our perception of the architectural object as something endowed with function and meaning. We start from the concepts of icon and instrument, which Eisenman would apply in his texts almost two decades later, in 1995.

Both concepts, icon and instrument, refer to Eisenman's nearly semiological analysis of architecture. With these concepts, one can understand an architectural element as a sign if we consider the properties of "iconicity" and "instrumentality" (Eisenman 2007a, p. 43), allied to the sign bipartition of signified and signifier. This way, this study proposes to analyze the role of scale in Cannaregio Town Square through a number of linguistic tools. This work also makes use of thoughts from Jacques Derrida on the relationship between linguistics and philosophy, in which we see some parallels with Eisenman's theories and projects. Therefore, at first, we will contextualize Eisenman's concerns that led to the projects discussed here, followed by the presentation of the works themselves, House 11a and its insertion in different scales in Cannaregio Town Square. After exposing the project concerns, we report our analysis tools and investigate the relationship between Eisenman's concepts and linguistic theories, culminating in some conclusions.

Here, we intend to apply the architect's concepts of "iconicity" and "instrumentality" to analyze his previous design for Cannaregio, in Venice. In such project, we already see some manifestations regarding its roles of what Eisenman would later call icon and instrument in architecture. Thus, this paper proposes to discuss how the relationship between our understanding of architecture and reality is affected by the indeterminacy of scale. Considering Cannaregio Town Square and the theories mobilized by it evoke the rupture of some conventions and certainties, we

are more interested in the questions that arise from this project than trying to find or impose some answers.

Against representation: a humanist tradition

The projects shown here, House 11a and Cannaregio Town Square, are based on Eisenman's investigations about how to think about architecture without it being necessarily linked to programmatic needs and serving people's needs. This involves some points, such as of function, representation, proportion and scale directly, understood as limiting architecture as an autonomous discipline.

These projects operate as polar opposite critics to functionalism by proposing the subversion (in the case of House 11a) and the extinction (when the house is incorporated into the Cannaregio project) of their intended function for a user. In fact, these projects belong to a moment in Eisenman's career in which the architect understands functionalism as an extension of the humanist tradition. That meant, then, that architecture, since the Renaissance, had been guided by anthropocentric precepts, keeping the design process centered on humanist ideals (Eisenman 1998a), such as function and form, dealing directly with notions such as beginning and end. So, since the advent of architecture as a result of construction regulated by a designer's thinking, the same procedures had been guiding building and reproducing external ideals.

By a humanist tradition, Eisenman means the maintenance of architecture as defined by the dialectical opposition between its internal arrangement and its formal articulation (the function-form relationship) endowed with an extrinsic meaning to it. His criticism focuses mainly on the adaptation of architecture to human proportions: "Architecture has traditionally been related to human scale. For five centuries man's bodily proportions have been a datum for architecture." (Eisenman 1986, p.77), occupying the center of their relationship. Not only for proportional adequacy or for determination of a programmatic function, but also for the maintenance of some ideals, such as origin or end, or even presence as a physically real form of the architectural object: "The issues of presence and origin are central to the question of anthropocentrism." (Eisenman 1986, p.77). That is, the necessity of building a design/project relates to the fulfillment of a purpose, which is also taken as a starting point when stipulating its program.

Whether privileging one or the other, Eisenman understands that the design of the project was always based on the causal link between program and type. This statement is exposed for the first time in his text "Post-Functionalism", from 1976, in which the architect argues that the permanence of the cause-effect relationship between function and form (and vice versa) reproduces an "[...] idealist view of man's relationship to his object world." (Eisenman 1998a, p.236). According to Eisenman, architecture would only take place as mediation between the user and his immediate surroundings through its construction – therefore, architecture would be merely a representation of this ideal way of interaction. Both privileging function and form, the architectural object would arise from the search for the adequacy of an ideal to its user, both through its proportions (type) and through its needs (program).

According to Eisenman, other areas such as mathematics, music, literature, painting, etc., abstracted the leading role of man in their modernist instances, which is seen as a break with the humanist ideology. They would be closer to being autonomous disciplines, something that modern architecture, in his view, was not capable of achieving. The aforementioned text is called “Post-Functionalism” precisely because the architect also points out in it that this causal relationship between program and type persists in modern functionalism, suggesting that one should think of an alternative, post-functionalism – and therefore post-humanist – approach. In other words, for Eisenman, functionalism would be a continuation of the humanist tradition by keeping man at the center, considering the practical purpose of constructions is prioritized (from the idealization of technology). This would perpetuate the position of architecture as a mere mediator, not thought through its conception itself. In this wise, the forms of functionalist architecture, in defense of industry and devoid of ornaments, would only be aesthetic and idealized manifestations of the moral impetus of transforming society and of this supposed new relationship between man and the world. However, its core would still be attached to the human body as a user:

For functionalism, no matter what its pretense, continued the idealist ambition of creating architecture as a kind of ethically constituted form-giving. But because it clothed this idealist ambition in the radically stripped forms of technological production, it has seemed to represent a break with the pre-industrial past. (Eisenman 1998a, p.237).

Following this statement, if what was reproduced until Beaux-Arts dealt with the representation of the human figure through its proportions, functionalist architecture had only transferred its focus to mimesis, mirroring itself, this time, in the machine, but still at the service of its user. What Eisenman proposes with “Post-Functionalism” is “a displacement of man away from the center of his world. He is no longer viewed as an originating agent.” and that “[architectural] Objects are seen as ideas independent of man.” (Eisenman, 1998a, p.238). Considering architecture as something devoid of a utilitarian purpose, whether by wavering of its built form or by the indeterminacy of its function, would guarantee a rupture with its role of representation and mediation.

Only in “The end of the classical: The end of the beginning, the end of the end”, from 1984, Eisenman would formulate in a more purposeful way how to design through other ways of thinking and producing architecture. Prior to that, some experiments had already put into practice Eisenman’s criticism of the centrality of man and its positioning as an originating agent, whether in the criticism of the relationship of similarity (formal and proportional), or in the maintenance of this same relationship of similarity with its utility (relationship function-form). We will see how House 11a deals conceptually and formally with such criticism and how its replication at different scales in Cannaregio Town Square enhances its questioning.

Three scales

House 11a

House 11a was conceived two years after “Post-Functionalism”, designed in 1978 for art and architecture historian and critic Kurt Forster, but never built. The proposal deals with the extinction of any possible centrality, both in the forms applied and in man as user.

Formally, the decentralization of the subject in this project is marked by the predominance of voids to the detriment of “full forms.” That is, instead of using mostly squares and cubes – remarkably stable and perfect shapes – Eisenman withdraws their centers, creating what he called “el forms” (Eisenman 1982, p.54). These “el forms” were first used in House X (1975), adding up to a fragmented and perpetually incomplete architecture (Fig.01). Emptiness predominates, nullifying any mimesis with the human body, marked by the loss of what Eisenman (1982) understands as the archetype of the house as conceptually vertebrate. For him, houses are usually thought of as bearing a center, whether that be the fireplace or the stairs, in addition to the roof pitch that sometimes also establishes a symmetric axis, which would configure some kind of backbone:

Most houses are conceptually vertebrate. [...] The center expresses both the functional core (either as a place or as a route) and conceptual unity of a house. Here [in House X] the center is no longer a place nor route, it is essentially nothing. The vertebrate house is also mimetic; it mirrors man’s upright, axial, condition. In an attempt to produce a conceptual distance between man and object, House X is non-vertebrate; to this extent it is non-mimetic. (Eisenman 1982, p.88).

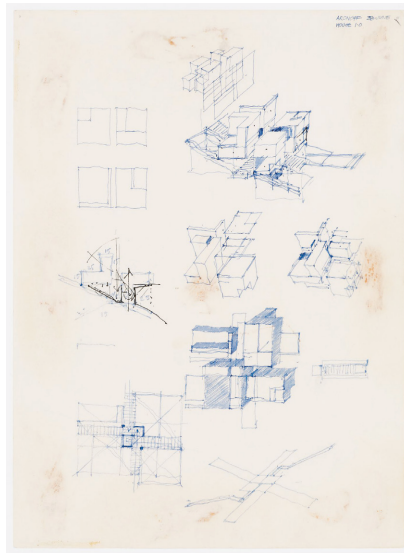


Fig. 01. Peter Eisenman, House X, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan: conceptual sketches. 28 June 1975.

Blue and black ink on paper, 27.7 × 20.2 cm. DR1994:0138:066.

Source: Peter Eisenman fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture © CCA.

House 11a, however, expands man's alienation beyond the decentralization of volumes. Its spatial arrangement seeks to dissolve the separation between interior and exterior, resorting to properties of topological geometry. Like a Möbius strip, the house unfolds almost from a single surface through the articulation of the “el forms”, in a way that creates an uninterrupted continuity (Fig.02). This interaction between forms causes a deformation of both the purity and the stability of Euclidean geometry. Furthermore, they demonstrate the rupture with the certainties established by the Euclidean geometry, such as the notions of interior and exterior and, therefore, of perception of reality. For this reason, even when the user is inside the house, the effect is as if he were outside, positioned as an observer, not a resident. Or rather, it plays with the possibility of being an observer which is at the same time inside and outside, as the client's statement points out:

As the client, I would like to remain a viewer of the house while inside of it. [...] I would be a viewer who is inside, separate from what he is dealing with, which is the world short and simple on the outside, and at the same time, while I am inside and separated from it, I would be able to know about it, I would have the world present. I would like to be in this dual condition of the viewer who is both inside and outside of the house. (Forster 1978 cited in Weil [no date]).

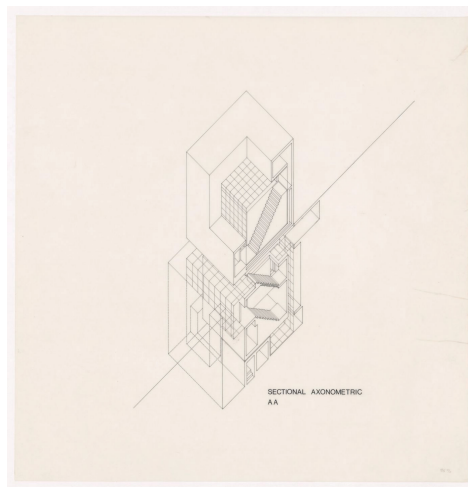


Fig. 02. Peter Eisenman, Sectional axonometric for House 11a, Palo Alto, California. 1978. Drawing in pen and ink with scraping (as erasures) on translucent paper, 53,6 × 53,5 cm. DR1994:0139:283.

Source: *Peter Eisenman fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture* © CCA.

The formal distortion occurs simultaneously upwards and downwards on the ground surface, so that this same continuous surface reveals and hides (Fig.03). Thus, it engages with the perception of what we access as the truth or reality of objects: can we really access their totality?

The resulting configuration [of the House 11a's topological sheets] appears to have an inside and an outside but in fact there is no real inside and no real outside, only two deformed membranes. (Eisenman 1978 cited in Weil [no date]).

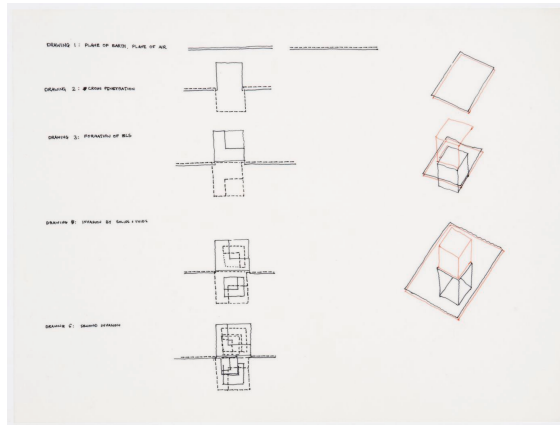


Fig. 03. Peter Eisenman, Conceptual sections and axonometrics with instructions for House 11a, Palo Alto, California. 1978. Ink on translucent paper, 22,8 x 30,5 cm. DR1994:0139:001.

Source: Peter Eisenman fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture © CCA.

Cannaregio Town Square

Cannaregio Town Square was designed in the same year as House 11a, 1978, bringing to the urban fabric the concerns surfaced by House X and further elaborated in House 11a. It operates by incorporating elements of Venetian history and memory. The voids that were already *formal parts* of House X are explored in this project in a more abstract way, since the components used for its conception are not present pieces in the city, but events that actually or potentially happened in Venice. Consequently, they lack their physical condition. Some of them are Le Corbusier's never built Venice Hospital, the incorporation of also never built House 11a and the event of the imprisonment of Giordano Bruno by the Inquisition.

A small text stems from each of these events, composing the “Three texts for Venice”: “Text one”, “Text two” and “Text three.” We will focus on “Text two”, which deals specifically with the incorporation of the three scales of House 11a.

“Text two” presents two groups of objects. The first fits the existing context, but its objects are solid and lifeless blocks, “[...] their presence is nothing but an absence.” (Eisenman 1980, p.9). The second group is the one that matters most to us: it is a series of objects that, instead of relating to the existing context, it dialogues with the voids arising from “Text one”, from holes in the ground (or graves) that come from the structural grid of Venice Hospital (Fig.4).

This group of objects consists of six replicas of House 11a inserted into the mentioned graves. Each of these replicas, in fact, has two smaller versions of itself inside, with exactly the same shape (Fig.5). However, none of the three versions corresponds to a type or program of the architecture because they do not fit a usual scale or cannot be occupied: “The first object is smaller than a house, the second is the size of a house, the third is larger than a house.” (Eisenman 1980, p.9). These three replicas are one inside the other, preventing any one of them from being occupied, while the smallest one, the only which is empty, is smaller than a house, prevented from offering shelter. The intermediate one, which has the size of a house, shelters its smaller version.



Fig. 04. Peter D. Eisenman, Architect (architectural firm), Presentation model including Cannaregio West and Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital. 1978. Gold and pink paint over wood and cardboard, 9 x 101 x 101 cm. DR1992:0009.

Source: Peter Eisenman fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture © CCA.



Fig. 05. Peter Eisenman, Competition entry for the International Seminary of Design, Cannaregio West, Venice: Sectional model of El structure. 1978. Grey, beige, and pink paint over wood with plexiglas, 101 x 101 x 27 cm. DR1992:0010.

Source: Peter Eisenman fonds, Canadian Centre for Architecture © CCA.

Allied to the indeterminacy of the scale, the three versions also carry the indeterminacy of their names and our perception of which is real and which would be a representation:

Is it a house, or a tomb for itself, or for a model of itself, or for a real object? *If it is a mausoleum, then the first object, the five-foot “house” is no longer a model of something real, but a reality itself, no longer a model of something but something in itself.* (Eisenman 1980, p.9).

Which of the three sizes would the real object be? If one of them is *the real one*, would the smaller one be its model, that is, an ordinary representation, or would it also be a real object, an architecture in itself?

Iconicity and Instrumentality

What interests us in the use of these different scales in House 11a is the way in which their indeterminacy affects our perception of architecture and even its identification as a real object. Since it is not possible to define the use of these architectural objects by their program – the proportions of none of the “houses” correspond to those of the human body –, it is also impossible to categorize them into any type. There is no certainty as to what these objects can be called, which are confused with the miniature of a house, or a model, or a house itself, or a museum for this supposed house, a tomb for the house or for the model.

The play with our perception of reality is only allowed by the resources of determination and recognition of the objects around us. For this reason, one places a human scale on drawings and models: to be able to relate the dimension of the project to the physical space. The scale deals, therefore, with the meaning linked to the typology and its respective programs. Regarding the three versions of House 11a, it is only possible to try to fit each of them into a type – house, tomb, museum, mausoleum – based on the approximations of their scales, but through the relationship they establish with each other, and not with the user – since they do not correspond to human proportions.

It is important to notice, however, that all versions start from the “house”, from House 11a, which still has the initial purpose of *being a house, even though it already contravenes some conventions*. Therefore, it carries in itself the essential function of architecture, which is sheltering and protecting its user. It seems impossible to get rid of this idea. Its subversion in the Cannaregio project takes place in the extinction of its primordial role precisely because of the *indeterminacy of the scale* and, consequently, the *indeterminacy of its name*. That is, what is incumbent upon the *idea* of housing and how this relates to the way we receive and appropriate it.

This topic touches upon what would be an *icon* in architecture, a categorization brought from semiotics whose nature can be described as the object’s relationship with external reality. The linguist and semiotician Thomas A. Sabeok (2001 p.10) explains an icon as being “[...] a sign that is made to resemble, to simulate, or reproduce its referent in someway.” It derives from the similarity between carriers of the same properties. According to Sabeok, *index is also a type of sign related to an external reality, but whose attributes deal with temporal and spatial frames*:

[...] refer[ring] to something or someone in terms of its existence or location in time and space, or in relation to something or someone else. (Sabeok 2001 p.10).

An important third type of sign is *symbol*. The relationship established by symbols with its referent is done by conventions. That is, the link between the sign and what it means is not so direct, not made through similarity: the symbol carries a message stipulated by a social convention – an idea, such as a cross figure to stand the concept “christianity” (Sabeok 2001 p.11).

The iconic property would provide the object with an *a priori* condition interconnected to an entire imagery with other similar objects, carrying with it this common concept. In his text from 1995 called “Presentness and the being-only-once of architecture”, Eisenman gives us the example of a wall: among other resemblances, such as spatial separation, a wall will always have a relationship of similarity with another wall under the idea of “element that supports a ceiling.” In his words: “A wall in architecture is not merely holding something up, it also symbolizes the act of holding up.” (Eisenman 2007, p.43).

This means that not every wall necessarily supports a ceiling, but the concept of “wall” will be commonly linked to this idea, what Eisenman (2007a, p.43) calls “iconicity.” That is, the wall will always be linked to this *signified* – what Jacques Derrida (1967, p.412) understands as a “transcendental meaning” and a “metaphysical concept”¹–, regardless of its materiality or its “effective” role. Thus, we could say that what Eisenman calls “iconicity” in architecture surpasses the limits of similarity imposed to icons and also faces some characteristic of symbols, reaching the *idea* of these objects.

However, the wall originally has the function of supporting, which carries with it something that Eisenman (2007a, p.43) defines as its “instrumentality.” This is a unique condition of architecture: regardless of the program, it will never be able to be separated from its architectural convention, the meaning linked to its function. In architecture, the iconicity of an element will always be linked to its instrumentality because an architectural object is usually conceived to be built and occupied. It seems to be the essence of architecture and it clashes with the discussion that opened this paper: the rupture with the utilitarian role of representation and mediation played by architecture. Eisenman (2007a) points out that even an architectural design that would be impossible to build, such as Piranesi’s Carceri series, continues to be imagined and interpreted as physical elements.

At this point, it is already possible to expose the relationship between the decentralization of the forms that make up House 11a with the intention of subverting what would be the transcendental meaning of architecture to shelter.

Decentralization had already been treated by Derrida (1967) as a way to interrupt a teleological conception of knowledge and discourse. That is, for Derrida, the existence of a center (in a given system or in the structure of a discourse) would always imply the connection and regulation of an origin to an end. The notion end is also

¹ From the original: “signifié transcendantal” and “concept métaphysique” (Derrida 1967, p.412).

about searching for an unattainable ideal – as Eisenman points out in “Post-Functionalism”. Let us remember that between the 1960s and 1980s (mainly through Deconstruction), many thinkers sought to break with the notion of universal truth. In Derrida’s thought, this rupture would imply the extinction of the “centers” and opening up to different interpretations other than the sovereignty of a truth. Thus, decentralization, for Derrida (1967, p.427), seeks to overcome man and humanism by the rupture of the totalization of history, plenitude of knowledge and truth – again, implied in the rupture with concepts of origin and end. The philosopher demonstrates an example by the relationship between signifier and signified of a sign, in which the form, so to speak, always refers to a preponderant concept:

For the meaning “sign” has always been understood and determined, in its sense, as a sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified.² (Derrida 1967, p.412).

But Derrida recognizes that it is not possible to extinguish such predominance of the signified over the signifier simply by “erasing” the metaphysical meaning to which the sign is linked:

[...] we cannot announce any destructive proposition that has not already been seen slipping into form, into logic and into the implicit postulations of the very thing we would like to contest.³ (Derrida 1967, p.412).

In other words, one can only question a discourse by using the tools and vocabulary of the *discourse itself*. The attack takes place through subversion, not through extinction.

It is at this moment that we understand the strength of Eisenman’s attitude in incorporating a previous project, of a house – with all the notions embedded in its iconicity and its instrumentality *as a house* – that cannot be inhabited, nor even occupied because its dimensions do not allow it to perform its function. The house, as a sign, has both its signified corrupted, precisely because it does not correspond to its primordial idea, and its signifier, since it is not even possible to name each of the three scales because we are not able to assign them to a function. It is not just a case of categorizing it as a house or a museum, since the indeterminacy of the scale prevents one even from verifying which is the “original object”, which is the true and real one among the three sizes arranged one inside the other. In this case, the corruption of the “house” as a sign is achieved purely through scale. The iconicity of the “house” remains, but shaken, since its instrumentality is rejected. Therefore, our conception of “home” and the reality of “home” are also shaken.

² From the original: “Car la signification ‘signe’ a toujours été comprise et déterminée, dans son sens, comme signe-de, signifiant renvoyant à un signifié, signifiant différant de son signifié.” (Derrida 1967, p.412).

³ From the original: “[...] nous ne pouvons énoncer aucune proposition destructive qui n’ait déjà dû se glisser dans la forme, dans la logique et les postulations implicites de cela même qu’elle voudrait contester.” (Derrida 1967, p.412).

Conclusions

Iconicity and instrumentality are two concepts applied by Peter Eisenman to understand certain properties of architecture. For a given object to be recognized *as architecture*, it necessarily carries these two properties. Therefore, the attempt to propose new approaches to the discourse of “architecture” cannot disregard the relationship between icon and instrument that define the architectural object. Otherwise, it would cease to be “architecture.”

The procedure for this proposition – which does not nullify the existence of the usual conception of architecture, that is, offering shelter – operates through the subversion of the internal structures of its discourse. How to produce architecture that, at the same time, contradicts the demands of utility and similarity, imposed by what Eisenman (1998a; 1998b) considers to be remnants of a humanist tradition, without leaving the field of *architecture*? Questioning our ways of receiving it. And Eisenman did this by subverting the idea of architecture and the relationship it establishes with the *reality of the physical world* when it corrupts what is perhaps its icon and primordial instrument: the house.

House 11a was already trying to break with the precept of resemblance to man through formal manipulation, but even so, it maintained the fundamental relationship of dwelling and also of naming as “house.” Its insertion in the Cannaregio Town Square leaps toward this transgression process from the moment in which the figure of the man as a reference point for its elaboration is completely erased. And this is only possible through manipulating the scale.

As there were three versions of the same house in three different proportions, one inside the other, man ceases to be the user – the point of origin of the project’s conception as a measurement reference and also the one for whom architecture is intended. Architecture starts to shelter itself, because its scales refer only to *themselves*, giving the scale the meaning of “who is the project intended for?”. We clearly perceive this definition when we think of a project aimed exclusively at children, for example. The space layout will take on distinct proportions from those designed for teenagers and adults.

What is questioned here is just the highlight of this reflection, or rather, this *self-reflection* of architecture. It is a theoretical formulation to think about other ways of conceiving and practicing architecture, without proposing the extinction of its ordinary way. The use of the three different scales of House 11a in Cannaregio presents itself as this exercise of showing alternative ways of conceiving architecture not restricted by the fulfillment of demands. It is a self-absorbed architecture to draw attention to the design act, an exercise of thinking about architecture. At this point, it would be possible to bring it closer to philosophy or art precisely because of the way it presents its critique. However, the concepts of iconicity and instrumentality show us that it seems to be impossible to understand architecture as art – in its tautological sense of being completely detached from a purpose – or as philosophy, since the “architecture” icon will always refer to something that acts and functions as shelter.

What can be done is just to to merely *play* with this conception with this conception by proposing, *as a reflection*, an architecture, or rather, a house that turns in on itself, that shelters itself. Maybe one could not even call it a “house”, as its scale does not correspond to one, but departs from one. Its meaning is corrupted, but not completely erased, since, when it comes to architecture, this would be impossible. With that, the way we understand and perceive it also changes. That is, by the simple act of manipulating the scale, we are not able to enter this “house” or even define it under a name or a category. This is not quite simple, since it draws theory from different fields of knowledge and also questions architecture’s ontological points. How do we receive it and also understand it? We are no longer certain of our reality: here, architecture no longer fulfills the role of mediator of our relationship with the world. We are thus faced with some senses (and distortions) of scale.

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