

Architecture is a life project I Essay Cameron McEwan | October 2014

Most of the architects whose work is included in this exhibition graduated from architecture schools in the period between the late 1990s and the early 2000s. Angela Deuber, Emanuel Christ and Christoph Gantenbein (Christ & Gantenbein Architects), Rolf Jenni and Tom Weiss (Raumbureau), Raphael Zuber, and Pascal Flammer graduated from ETH Zürich. Their mentors included Hans Kollhoff, Jacques Herzog, Elia Zenghelis, Pier Vittorio Aureli and Valerio Olgiati.

The project itself revisits the tradition of using a client to advance the formal and conceptual preoccupations of an individual architect through the design of a private house. However, the works are not merely solutions to a given client brief but use the brief to define an architectural language that exceeds the particular site, brief and the desires of the client. As will be seen, the designs challenge the formal preconception for houses designed for the Highlands and Islands - all are sited on the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides, Northwest Scotland. One of the aims was to bring together a group of architects with mutual respect for one another and who hold a will to intelligently discuss as well as purposefully investigate the core principles of architecture - historical consciousness, formal and spatial manipulation, programmatic invention - to advance architecture as a distinct body of knowledge. At the same time each of the architects asserts their authorial role.

The purpose of the following text is to first appraise each of the eight designs then to briefly reflect on the category of authorship. The analysis focuses on space and form rather than style or experience and is intentionally abstract rather than figurative because this is a way to discuss the shared characteristics of a series of designs as spatially and formally varied as those compiled here. As a way to read space the category of "spatial force" is borrowed from Peter Eisenman and refers to the particular direction in which space is predominantly composed: either as centripetal from the edge to the centre, or centrifugal from the centre and out.

I will start my appraisal with Angela Deuber's design, a house for a client who wanted a space to listen to music and read books. A long wall divides the ground floor plan in two, recalling Mies' brick house plans. The ground above the wall contains cellular spaces including the bedroom, bathroom and a stair core. Below the central wall lies the dining space enclosed by glazing so that the cellular rooms contrast with the open and light space. A column in the glazed wall anchors this latter space and provides a static counterpoint to the extending wall. The long wall and the singular column serve to contain the spatial force of the plan.

In section, Deuber's house is terminated by a sharply pitched roof with deep eaves that turn up at the end. The upper storey is envisioned as the space for listening to music and reading. While the implied spatial force is contained within the limits of the ground floor plan, in the upper floor the direction of space extends outward into the landscape. The sequence of spaces leads from outdoor to cellular space, from edge to centre, from ground to upper storey and views to the landscape beyond resulting in an episodic architectural promenade. While Deuber responds to the landscape condition of the island by conceiving the house itself as a landscape, Christ and Gantenbein use the house project to further their investigation into architectural types.

The design - a house for two artists - takes the metal clad farm buildings found in any rural location as its typological reference and is divided into three longitudinally planned bays. The central bay is an outside courtyard with a triangular shaped pool to one end. On one side of the court is the cellular living accommodation. Opposite this and across the court is the open plan working accommodation containing the artists studio and office. The bays are articulated in section with three pitches. Two of these are extruded to form the roof of the living and working accommodation, while the elevation to the court is left free standing. Space is contained in the court and forced inward.

By contrast, in the house designed by Neil Gillespie (of Reiach and Hall Architects) the spatial force stretches into the landscape and up to the sky. The house is conceptualised as combining the two architectural types of pavilion and tower. The pavilion is low lying and rectangular in plan with a square courtyard positioned off centre. On axis with the court, a balcony is extruded into the landscape emphasising the horizontal extension of space. By contrast, the tower rises from one corner of the pavilion plan with spatial force directed vertically.

While it is possible to read these designs as responding to the island conditions they are ultimately autonomous inquiries into, on one hand the architectural promenade (Deuber) and on the other into architectural type-forms (Gillespie, and Christ and Gantenbein). The remaining designs seem to insist more forcefully on investigating architecture in vacuo.

Raphael Zuber's design consists of a series of volumes arranged around a central longitudinal space with deep walls and is aligned parallel with the coastal edge. The bedroom spaces are positioned on the long side that faces the coast and open up to the views. They are accessed via a tight corridor connected to the main long volume.

The other side of the main volume is closed in its formal language with only one opening from a triangular alcove space defined by a "floating" column. The column provides a focal point to the composition and serves to centre a non-centralised space. We can be reminded of Peter Eisenman's

spatial decompositions. The presence of a non-structural column suggests that before architecture is structure or construction, architecture is first a spatial representation of any given structure or construction. Zuber's design is an architecture of space and edges. Returns, extrusions, rotations and penetrations define volumes which are then assembled. The main volume refuses to open up to views of the landscape and coast. Instead, views are implied by a top lit alcove to the west edge of the long volume. We can imagine a diffuse light reminding the visitor of the land and water beyond, heightening the tension.

While in Zuber's design, the spatial force extends from the longitudinal volume primarily in one direction, in Raumbureau's design for a house with distinct family and guest accommodation, the spatial force is centripetal upon initial consideration. The square plan contains and centralises space within a courtyard which frames a portion of landscape before space breaks into a circular outdoor pond. In elevation, spatial force pushes the house down into the landscape. Each side of the plan is divided in the following way: reception with entrance rooms to one side; then guest rooms; then family rooms; and finally the dining area, kitchen and an open terrace. Raumbureau force the use of the courtyard by using it as entrance to each side of the house, thus continuously exposing man to nature. Like Raumbureau, Johannes Norlander investigates the square plan. It addresses the nine square problem and centralises circulation and service core, reversing the Palladian model of a square plan villa with circulation around a central open hall. Glazing wraps around the ground floor until it is interrupted by a single wall which closes the bedroom space. The corners of the house are defined by over-scaled columns, which the shallow pitched roof touch at the column edge. In doing so the house reads as composed by singular elements: shallow roof sitting precariously on over-scaled columns with planes as either glazed or solid and a singular chimney.

The last two designs by Pascal Flammer can be understood as in dialogue. In the first, a large circle encloses and frames a landscape of rocks. This connects with a small semi-circle that defines a living space from which views are directed to the expanse of the sea beyond. Flammer positions a circular fireplace and polygonal hall within the poche where the large circle and the small semi-circle meet. While the large circle contains and frames the land, the semi-circle is open implying that space is directed outward to the sea. Disrupting the absoluteness of the circle and the openness of the semi-circle is the rectangularly planned slab of cellular accommodation, which is positioned between land and sea. If spatial force is conceptually contained in this house, in Flammer's second design, space explodes, in the first instance, centrifugally.

Flammer's second design is an ensemble of carefully composed fragments which appear to explode outward from a centrally located circular fireplace. Cellular volumes recall on one hand miniature versions of the colliding forms of James Stirling's museum projects and on the other John Hejduk's Wall Houses. A carport and garage are positioned on one side of the wall while on the other side are bedroom spaces. Where the wall meets the circular fireplace the plan inflects inward thus countering the centrifugal composition of the initial reading. At this point the figure of the circle is duplicated in the following two ways: on one hand as a curving wall, and on the other as a roof plane. The concave side of the curving wall encloses a living space and defines one of two external courtyards. The convex side defines the second external court and an atelier arrived at via the living space then the two courts in sequence. A monumental over-scaled square column structures the circular roof plane and conceptually reflects the spatial force from the centre out and back. With the roof tilting upward and toward the centre along the axis of the long wall, space is composed centrifugally once more.

Flammer's two houses are necessary counterpoints to one another. In the first a centripetal composition is emphasised while in the second spatial force is largely centrifugal; the first exaggerates a rationalistic tendency and the other puts this rationale into crisis; one evokes silence, the other noise. It is possible to see in the projects compiled here a reference to the "battle remnants" of the historical and neo avantgarde from say Le Corbusier and Kahn to Stirling, Hejduk, Rossi, Ungers and Eisenman: we can see the tradition of architectural promenade, non-figurative geometric forms, typological reduction and constructivist compositional complexity. Freed from the messy reality of clients, users, site, procurement and economy, the designs are autonomous architectural investigations into pure space and the purposeful manipulation of space resulting in the conceptual silence of strong architecture.

By way of conclusion it is interesting to briefly reflect on the category of authorship because each of the architects here believe in the status of the architect as singular author. I am reminded of an opposition put forward by Carpo in his book *The Alphabet and the Algorithm* (2011) which traces a genealogy of architectural production from the Medieval master-builder through the Renaissance to today. Carpo identifies artisanal authorship as extending from Filippo Brunelleschi, whose authorship was based on the strict step by step direction of construction whereby Brunelleschi would personally inspect - according to the myth - each brick and stone of the building by being continuously present on site and visible at all times.

By contrast, Carpo distinguishes intellectual authorship as belonging to Leon Battista Alberti, who proposed that a building be conceived in the mind of the architect, expressed in drawings and then executed by someone else upon instruction. Alberti thus posited the complete disembodiment of the

architectural design as a drawing from the actual construction of the building. By recalling Brunelleschi and Alberti - both of whom in different ways were fiercely authorial and forcefully committed to their specific position - we take a longitudinal view of the architects authorial role; a role that, in the years since the turn of this century in particular, has suffered by participatory tendencies and of consensus driven design decisions.

What is at stake in current architecture is not the production of new forms but the atomisation of the architect-author and the fundamental cultural value of architecture itself. The point being that the architects social purpose, their intellectual role as critical thinker and their contribution as form giver to culture is now replaced by a technocratic and managerial role within the weak pluralist ethos of today. As the history of architecture shows us, we need committed individuals - uncompromising architects - to produce strong architecture to develop the discipline with a view to overcoming the current architectural impasse. As Pascal Flammer commented in a discussion with this author, architecture itself is a life project.