

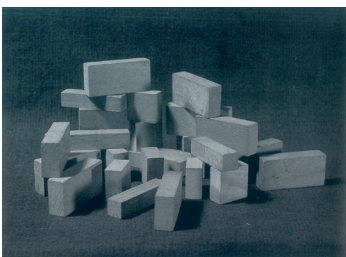
## Amra Salihbegovic Apologia for an Architecture of Play

### Abstract

Richness and ambiguity of architectural design are inherent in the freedom of individual design attitudes, where the essence of the imaginative realm is depicted by a creative design process that proceeds through a variety of levels but evolves from a playful intention. While the notion of play resembles the driving force in the infinite search for the appropriate answer to a certain problem, the different design solutions do showcase the manifold of possibilities an architectural design can offer. The notion of play is integrated into the architectural design in terms of abstraction of geometrical possibilities while imbuing architectural work with specific spatial qualities. Particularly, as in the contemporary work of Pezo von Ellrichshausen devoted to the continuous search for infinite spatial structures.

### Keywords

Design Process — Logic of Design — Play — Assembly



**Fig. 1**

Friedrich Froebel - Gift no. IV, c. 1890: "Pure forms", *Words and Buildings: A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*.

### Towards a playful architecture

From utopian architectural solutions to contemporary practices of current trends, the core of the design process evolves from a creative exploration of juxtaposing or eliminating diverse solutions brought back and forth. A design approach where the notion of play and assembly refer to the compositional capacity in architectural design and its representational significance. This nature of the design process was underlined in the following statement: «The whole force and rule of design, consists in a right and exact adapting and joining together the lines and angles which compose and form the face of the building» (Leon Battista Alberti as cited in Johnson, 1994, p. 414).

The reality and visionary solution might coincide in the manner that they offer to question our environment by imposing a critical reflection on a specific problem. Therefore, we can consider that an arbitrary play in architectural design can have a significant impact in moving the borderline of the current knowledge in practical, but as well as in the theoretical field. On the contrary, it can have a negative impact as the tools used and the methods applied with a certain degree can abolish the inherent qualities of architectural work. This thin line in-between of two alternatives should be balanced and mastered by the creativity of the architect and regulated by the specific preconditions. Where the differentiation of the trajectories of the building tasks, from inception to the final solution is underpinned by a constant search for redefinition. Its only constant medium is bond in many cases specifically by a coherent concept as the core of a design solution and determinant of the articulation of spatial structure. Whereas play and assembly define an explorative tool able to introduce an opposing view

towards a certain task, and a tool for critical inquiry relying on topological relations.

In his book *The Child's Conception of Space*, Jean Piaget (1956) explored the concept of space in terms of child psychology, determining that the child's conception of space relies on the topological relations prior to the development of projective or Euclidian relations. Precisely Piaget defined these elementary topological relationships as spatial proximity and separation, order and enclosure. Additionally, Johan Huizinga (1949) in his book *Homo Ludens*, acknowledged the concept of play as an essential cultural phenomenon. He elaborated on the significance of this phenomenon and its manifold nature.

In his book *Intentions*, Norberg-Schulz (1968) asserted the underlying playful intention in architecture stating «that architecture is something more than a play of forms, should be evident from the experiences of our daily life, where architecture participates in most activities» (p. 85). He pointed out the necessity of mastering this arbitrary play in terms of «understanding of the building task, of the means, and the planning hierarchies» (Norberg-Schulz, 1968, p. 204).

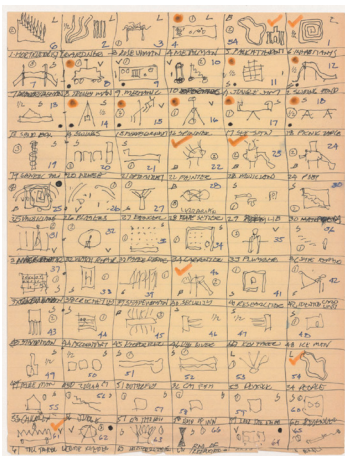
Paul-Alan Johnson (1994) argued about the definition of a design method as play and its discrepancy as a trace or a strategy of a game, which evolves as a tailor-made design act. He stated that «the rules or conventions of which countermand the action now and then, always mediate, yet are occasionally deferred or deformed to allow flexibility in play to keep the game alive» (Johnson, 1994, p. 256). He further elaborated on diverse notions of composition as artful arrangement, where he asserted that the compositional act «is said to have a high degree of freedom, with room to 'play' untrammelled (to a degree) by fixed rules and with a widely varying repertoire of elements» (Johnson, 1994, p. 416).

### Question of autonomy

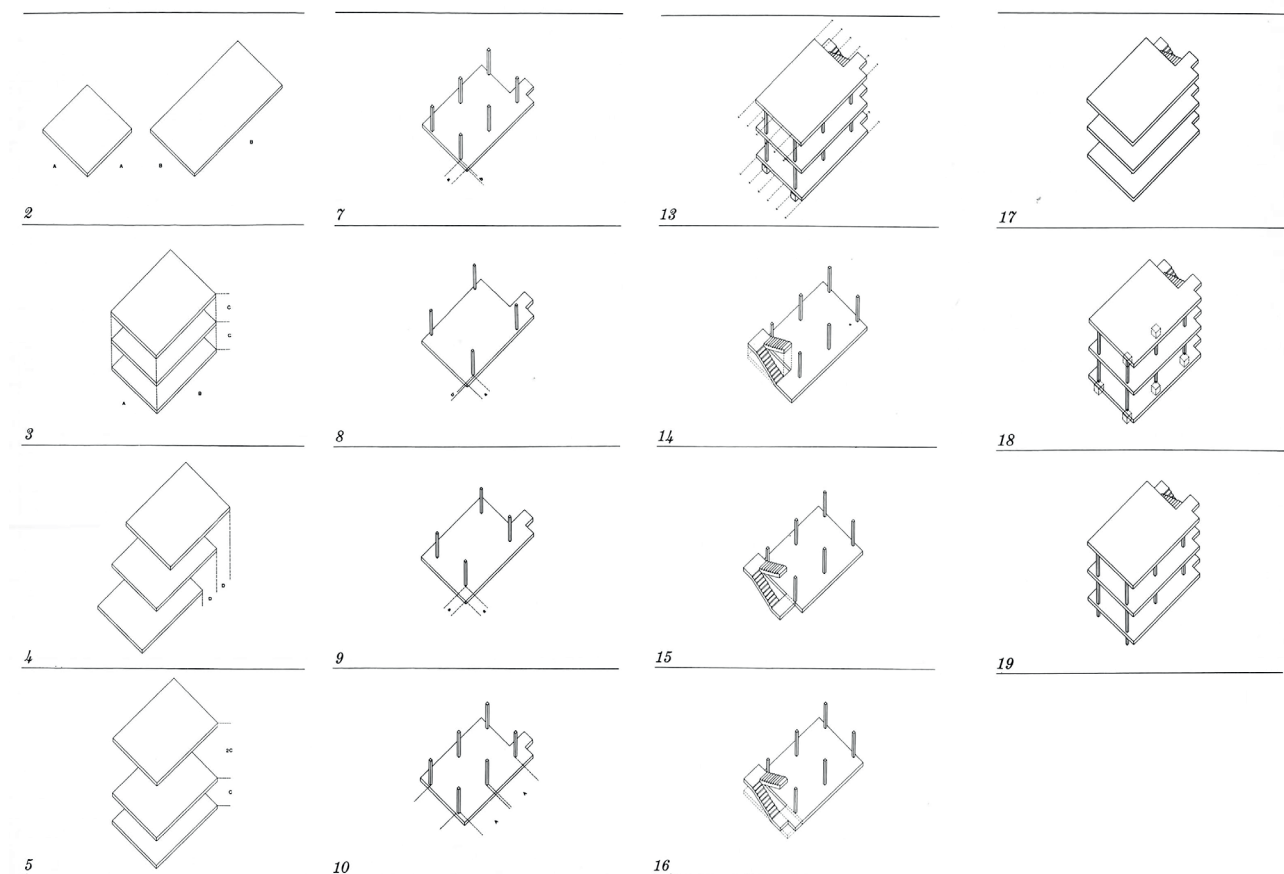
John Hejduk explored the extent of architectural possibilities in combining the imaginative, poetic realm while defining the notion of mask in several of his projects. While each of his projects is accompanied by a theoretical consideration and represents an autonomous work, it still relates the specificity of the characters and identities to the context. The juxtaposition of architecture with anthropomorphic elements that delineates these masques erased the architectural demarcation and extended the variety of its identity (Fig. 2). His architectural experimentation evolved through several attempts as Ockman (1997) explained that «recycling and canonizing a repertory of personal experiences and allusions, his work has become ever more iconic and self-consciously poetic, its masklike aspect conflated with a performative character of ritual or 'masque'» (p. 8).

A play-driven architecture gives impetus in the creation of a critical self-referential sign while extending the possibilities of a degree of autonomy of the discipline. These spatial manipulations as a framework, which do create a new meaning to the autonomous structure, can be traced in the example of the iconic design of Maison Dom-ino. Even though as Ven (1980) in his book *Space in Architecture* noted that Le Corbusier founded his work on the interplay of masses or «elementary forms: cubes, cones, spheres, cylinders or pyramids» (p. 188), the Maison Dom-ino is a distillation of a modernist architectural principle redefining the elements as the substantial aspects of architecture.

Eisenman (1998) implied several levels of autonomy and freedom of inter-



**Fig. 2**  
John Hejduk - Victims: table and list of characters and structures, 1984. John Hejduk fonds, CCA.



**Fig. 3**  
Maison Dom-ino and the Self-Referential Sign – Conceptual spectrum, Peter Eisenman, *Oppositions reader: selected readings from a journal for ideas and criticism in architecture*, 1973-1984.

pretation in the example of the Dom-ino diagram considering the correlation of essential elements in defining the architecture. He stated, «Thus, architecture is both substance and act. The sign is a record of an intervention – an event and an act which goes beyond the presence of elements which are merely necessary conditions. Architecture can be proposed as an ordering of conditions drawn from the universe of form together with the act of designating conditions of geometry, use, and significance as a new class of objects» (Eisenman, 1998, pp. 197-198). As presented in the conceptual spectrum (Fig. 3), its self-referentiality refers to the distillation and correlation of its essential elements. While Aureli (2014) interpreted the design as a “domino, one of many tiles twice as long as they are wide and assembled in a game according to specific rules” (p. 153).

### Outlines of contemporary spatial structures

Focusing on contemporary work, the Chilean based studio Pezo von Ellrichshausen uses the richness of play and assembly in the design process. They consider the spatial structure combinatorics as a substantial part of the building identity and the means in the search for a design solution. In terms of their projects, the application of the notion of play and assembly in the creative intention is denoted by an in-depth elaboration of methods used in extending the possibilities of reinventing architecture. Their building designs embody these notions and represent a criticism of society while establishing a significant impact on future tendencies.

The infinite spatial structures of the architectural duo represent their constant exploration of familiar structures composed on a variety of interlocking possibilities (Fig. 4). This process of repetition and superimposition of diverse elements reinvents the spatial structure and imposes a unique



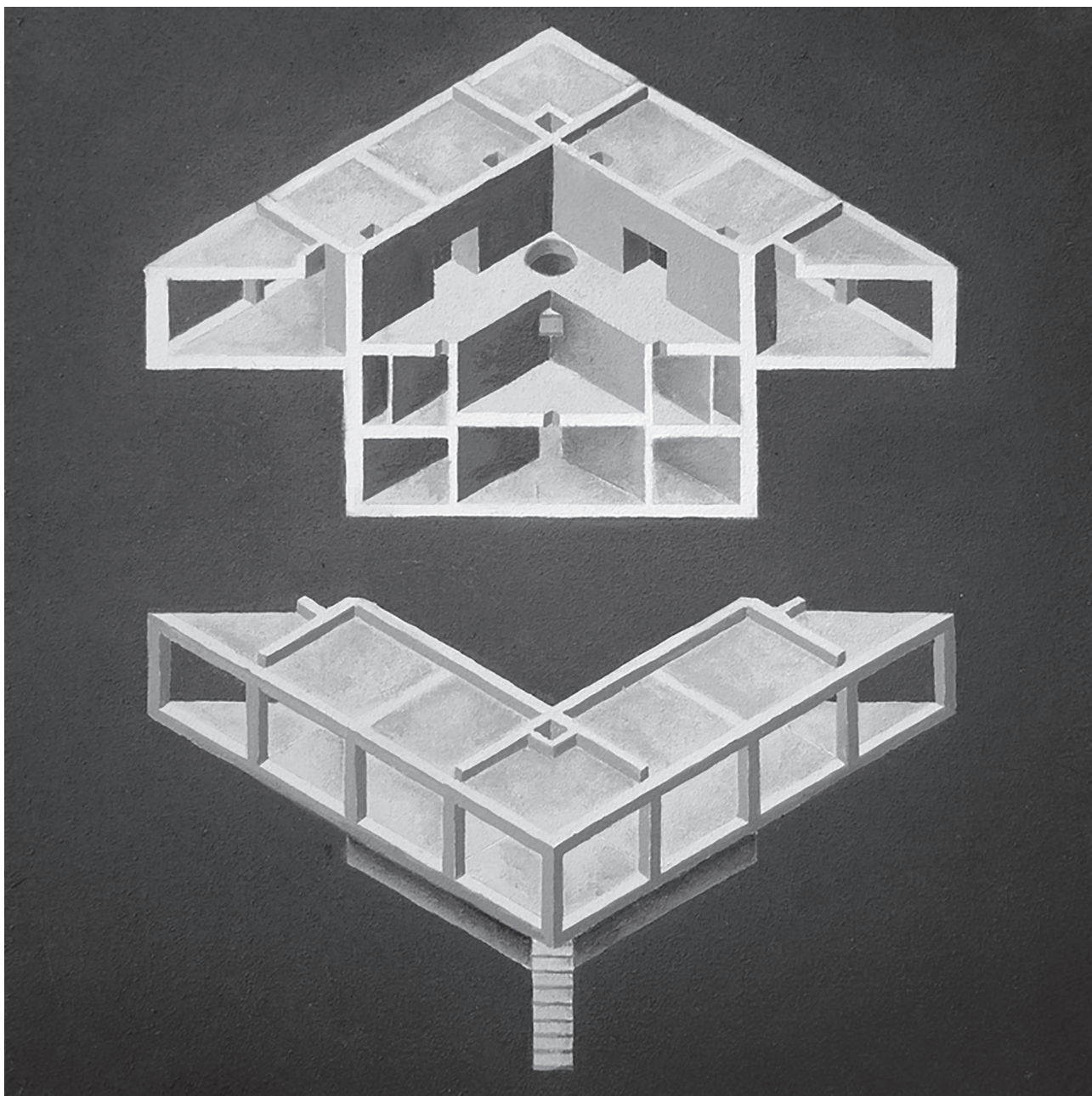
**Fig. 4**

Pezo von Ellrichshausen, Examples of spatial structures, *AV Monograph* (199) | Pezo von Ellrichshausen – Esempi di strutture spaziali, *AV Monograph* (199).

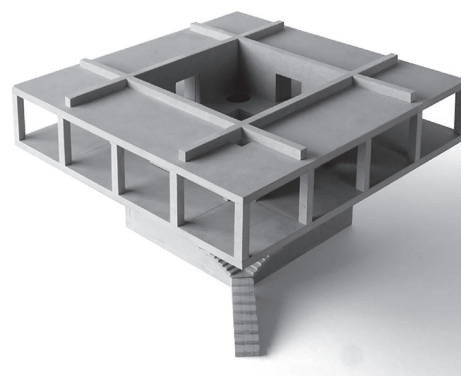
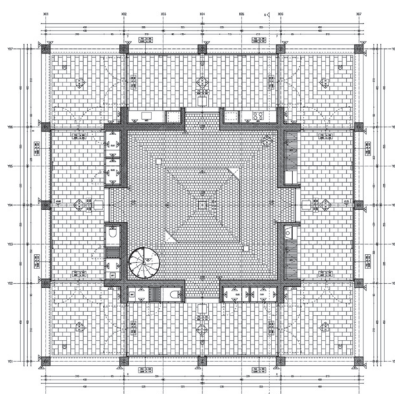
meaning for each architectural work. They explained their design process stating that «each time we finish a building we find we have executed just one specific variation within a panorama of possibilities for the same idea... playing different games with the same set of rules ...» (as cited in Oyarzun, 2017, p. 8). These rules are non-determined in their experimental endeavour while relying only on the topological relations of spatial elements. The richness and quality of their work impose questioning the conventional architectural experience, the totality of architecture as a self-referential object and the possibilities of a taxonomy that redefines typology. Each of their architectural buildings focuses on the duality, alterations, and correlation of specific elements that compose the spatial structure, the door, the platform, the podium or the column create the dichotomy between nature and object, public and private, horizontality and verticality or interior and exterior.

Pezo von Ellrichshausen is an architectural practice driven by the capacity of architecture in redefining elemental relationships, without the reference to anything than the definition of the internal architectural logic. They asserted that the quality and autonomy of their spatial structures focus on «...a form without context and without style or indication of origin. It is the basic form of relation amongst spatial units» (Pezo & Ellrichshausen, 2016, p. 139). Their architectural work is an exploration of spatial structures that consider the «duality of conceptual simplicity, and experiential complexity» (Pallasmaa, 2012, p. 8). This duality of a concept can be depicted in the example of contradictory notions of podium and platform, which exist in diverse residential projects. For instance, the House Cien, Solo House, Guna House, Nida House, Tora House, and Eder House.

The Solo House alternates in diverse manners this duality in the relation of



**Fig. 5**  
Pezo von Ellrichshausen, Solo  
House.





the opaque podium to the open transparent platform (Fig. 5). In particular, this duality is depicted in the ambiguity and interlocking of interior and exterior with the emphasis on their connection through an open courtyard. Symmetry in the composition gives an impression of monumentality and centrality of a dominant structure in the natural environment. Whereas the experiential complexity exists in the variety of paths and ambiguity created through the spatial articulation. The two entrances embracing the homogeneous symmetrical structure enable a variety of architectural promenades, from the internal courtyard paradoxically completely enclosed but open in comparison to the rest of the building design, to the perimeter of interior spaces open towards the surrounding. As Oyarzun (2017) stated, «like the exact pieces of a puzzle, the works by the Chilean studio compose a coherent whole where art and architecture are carefully intertwined» (p. 6).

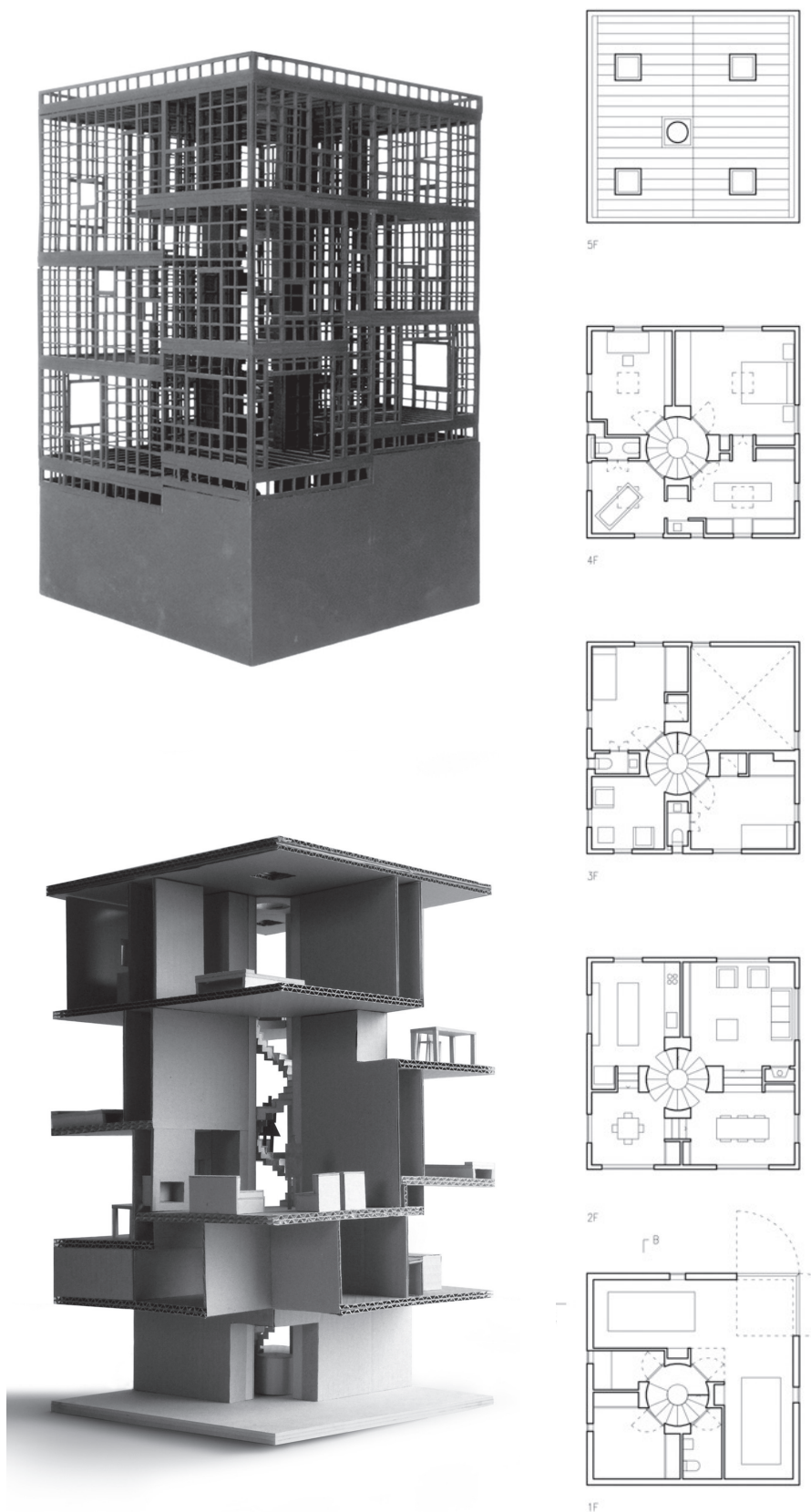
Several of their architectural works, as the Wolf House, Fosc House, Arco House or Gago House, represent experimentation on the notion of verticality where the building evolves from a process of diverse layering around a unique staircase. Among them, the architectural composition of the Gago House contains the richness of central staircases around which an interplay of spaces is gradually achieved (Fig. 6). Within the introverted stereotomic volume randomly punctured, occurs a complex spatial play of distinct qualities. Its asymmetrical position decomposes the pure volume and provides the possibility of a spatial hierarchy while distinguishing two paths. One through the central staircases intersecting the corners of each space and second connecting the centre of spaces. While the central void with its ascending spaces portrays the essence of the building design, the ambiguity of the staircases imposes its significance in comparison to other spaces. It is its richest seed and the most livable part of the building.

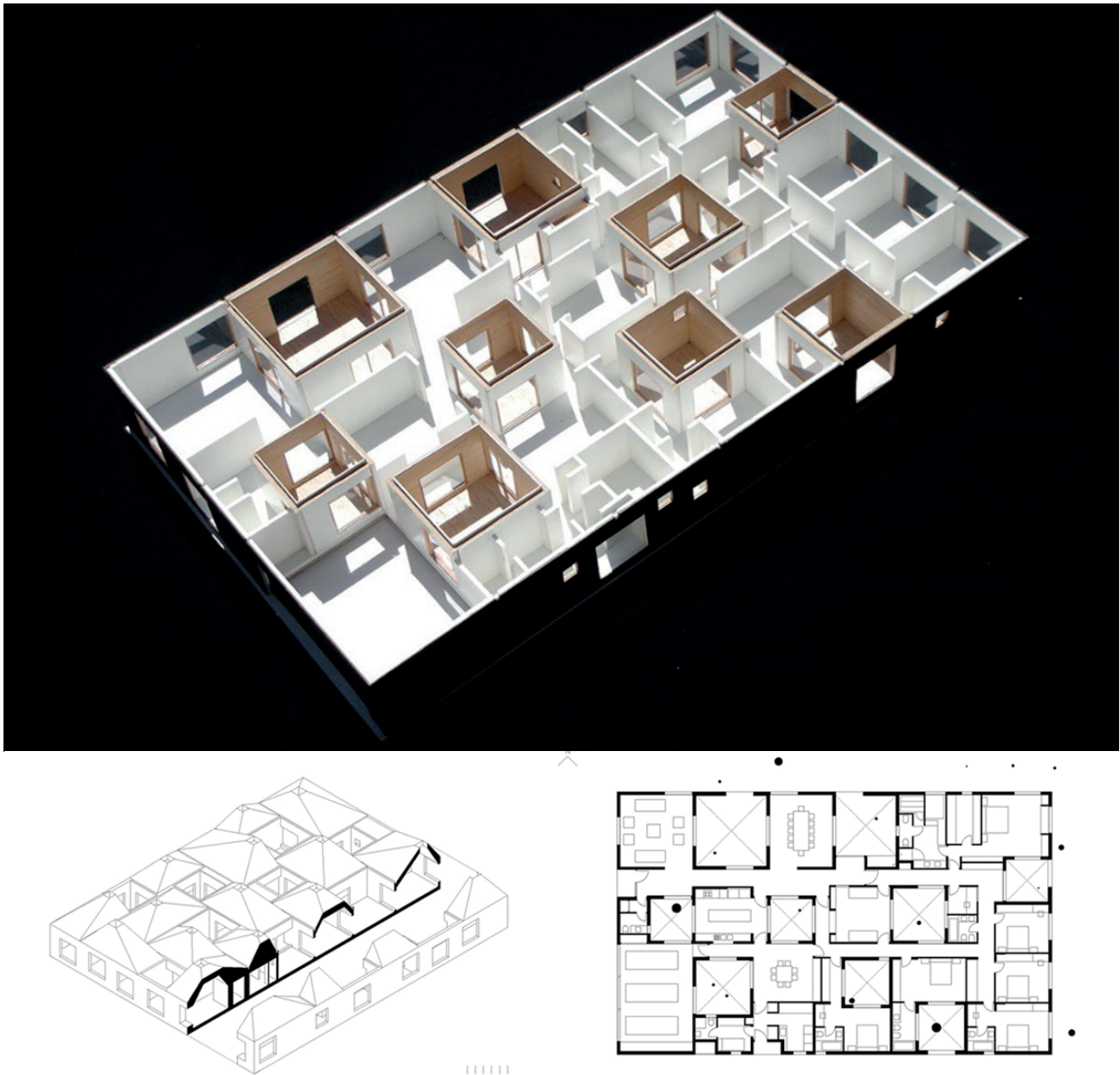
The third notion of play and assembly in their work refers to the concept of repetition denoted in the addition of assorted spatial structures. Several of their projects are intertwined with a design approach that considers determined addition on a vertical or horizontal axis. For example, in the case of Parr House, Puca Building, Meri House, Ines Building, Ocho House, or Utdt Building. The Parr House consists of a precisely defined repetition of individual spaces composed around nine courtyards (Fig. 7). The rather introverted one-floor building design complexity is depicted in the roof plan composed out of a variety of unique pitched roofs. Their design not only determined the figurative aspects of the building but also enables natural lighting in the introverted structure. Their direction is always pitched towards the courtyard in order not to cast shade, while the façade is punctured with diverse windows which are conditioned by the use of each space. This rather equal grid of thirteen rooms and nine patios abolished any hierarchy while imposing a continuous transition of spatial sequences. What undoubtedly unfolds these architectural approaches is the autonomy of their work. This concept of autonomy, refers to the intrinsic qualities of the nature of architecture which might evolve while incorporating the notions of play and assembly as a design method. In particular, this design method is used in terms of topological relationships while focusing the design intention in the exploration of spatial structures.

Starting from the child's conception of space to the critical architectural production of some contemporary practices, the notion of play deals with the spatial relations, the correlation of its essential elements and redefinition of conventional design. The intrinsic qualities of a built work evolved out of this design approach lie in its ability to be used as a tool for critical

**Fig. 6**

Pezo von Ellrichshausen, Gago House.





**Fig. 7**  
Pezo von Ellrichshausen, Parr  
House.

inquiry in the discipline. Its self-referential and autonomous nature encapsulates the possibilities of rethinking the conventional design while moving forward the architectural discipline. The contemporary practical and educational work of Pezo von Ellrichshausen, not only deals with current problems of the discipline but proposes to re-evaluate the future tendencies and typologies. This playful conception in architecture mediates between what is already known in this realm and what it might be.

This apologia for an architecture of play indicates the necessity to reconsider play and assembly as a substantial and explorative tool in architecture. The application of playful rules in architectural, in practice and as well in education, enable more extendable and flexible constraints and encourage visionary solutions.



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