

Before the Swiss Box

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notes from architecture

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Before the Swiss Box

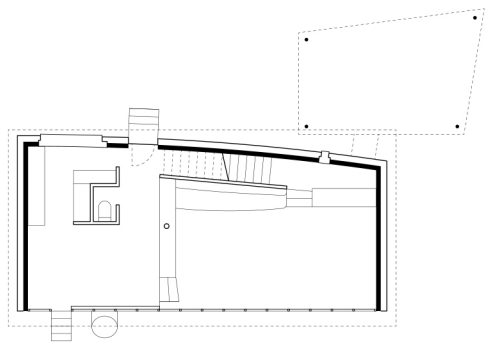
Herzog & de Meuron, 1984 – 1987

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"The work expresses itself in its own name. In this sense it is autonomous. It is at the service of nothing and no one. It would have no purpose if its ends were not expressive. In its expressive singular will, it exists for itself."

Rémy Zaugg, *The Art Museum of My Dreams*, 1986

Catalogue



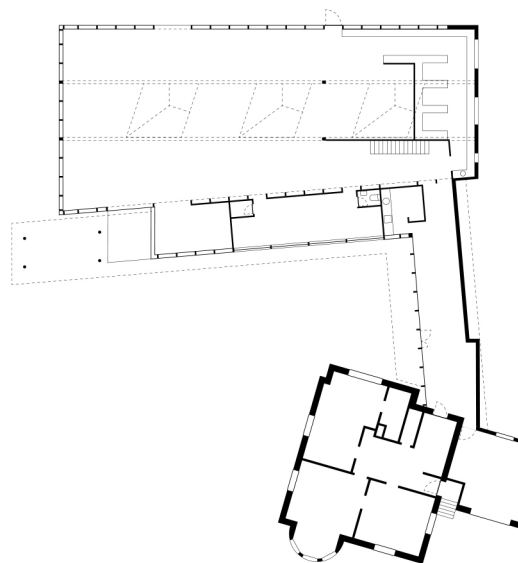
(005)

Blue House

1979-1980

Reservoirstrasse, Oberwil, Switzerland

5m



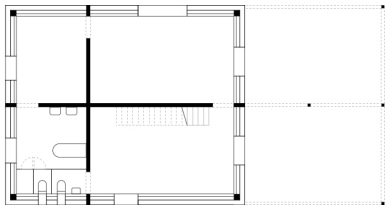
(014)

Photographic Studio Frei

1981-1982

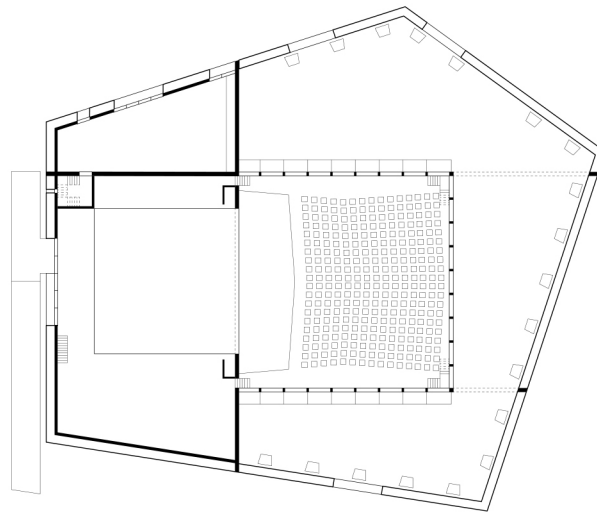
RiedlistraÙe, Weil am Rhein, Germany

10m



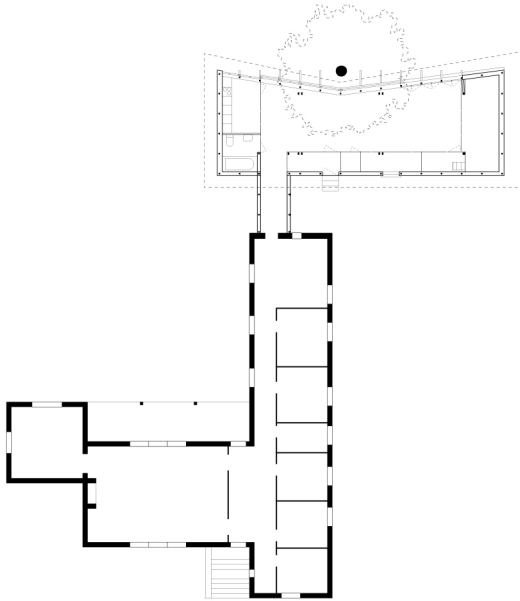
(017)
 Stone House
1982-1988
 Tavole, Italy

5m



(023)
 Visp Theater
1984
 Visp, Valais, Switzerland

10m



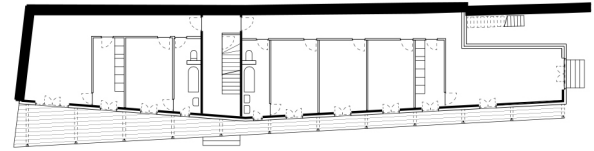
(027)

Plywood House

1984-1985

Rappenbodenweg, Bottmingen, Switzerland

5m



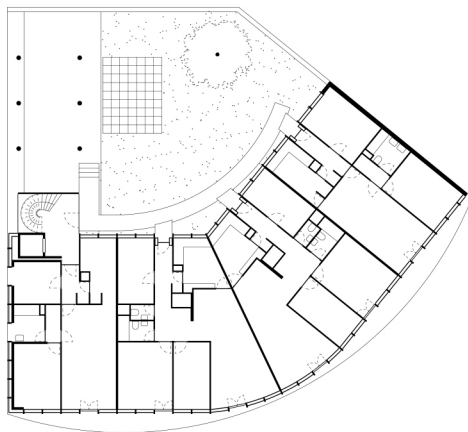
(029)

Apartment Building along a Party Wall

1984-1988

Hebelstrasse, Basel, Switzerland

10m



(031)

Schwitter Apartment and Office Building

1985-1988

Basel, Switzerland

10m



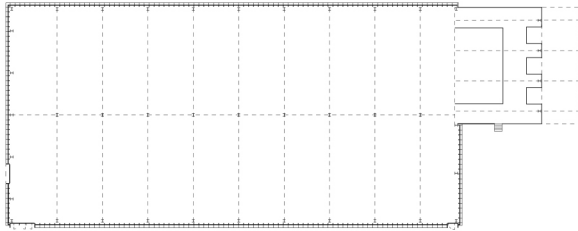
(034)

House for an Art Collector

1985-1986

Lerchenrainstrasse, Therwil, Switzerland

10m



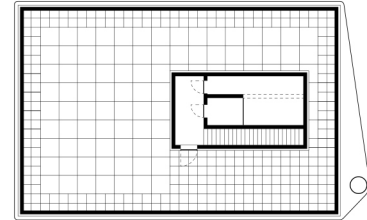
(038)

Ricola Storage Building

1986-1987

Baselstrasse, Laufen, Switzerland

10m



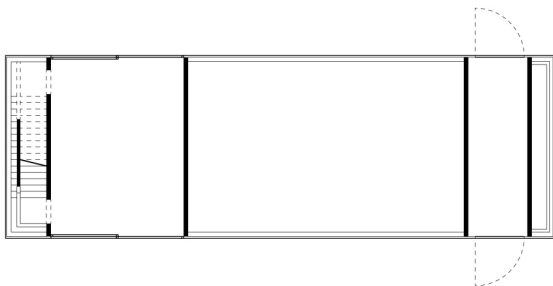
(049)

Signal Box Auf dem Wolf

1988-1995

Münchensteinerstrasse, Basel, Switzerland

10m



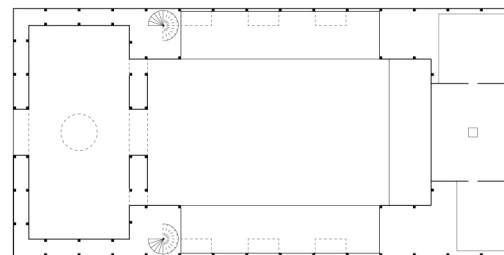
(056)

Goetz Gallery

1989-1992

Oberföhringer Strasse, Munich, Germany

10m



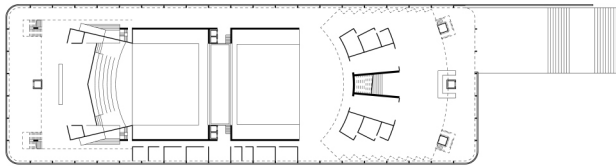
(057)

Greek Orthodox Church

1989

Zurich, Switzerland

10m



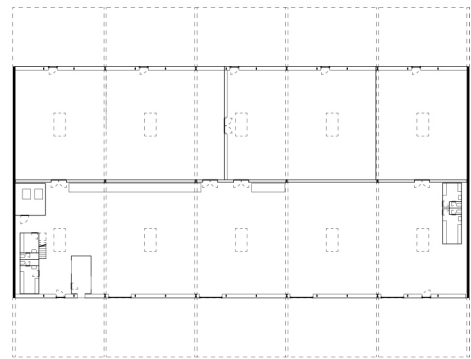
(075)

Centre Culturel de Blois

1991

Blois, France

20m



(094)

Ricola-Europe Production Building

1992-1993

Rue de l'III, Mulhouse, France

10m

“Above all one notices how these people who take a few principles of a theoretical line become so uncertain of those theories as to never wish to verify them, in what is the most important moment of any theory. In other words, the relation between a theoretical vision of architecture and the making of architecture. In the end one can only say this: that for some a theory is only a rationalization of a previous action—therefore it tends to be a norm rather than a theory.”

Aldo Rossi, *Architecture for Museums*, 1966.

**From Minimal Tradition
to *Minimal Moralia***

In 1997, Kenneth Frampton published *Minimal Moralia: Reflections on Recent Swiss German Production*, an article which harshly criticized the recent Swiss German architecture. Mirroring Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Swiss-German production is described as having been driven by a minimalist pursuit leading it to a purposeless situation; an artistic consumer goods derived in subtly diversified and totally unpredictable modes of expression.¹ "By failing to remain contemporary to its own time, the architectural discipline thus fell into a slow and inexorable, endless decline. Consequently, architects were transformed into amateurs and their discipline, once shared and collective, became a circle in which everyone has been trying to save themselves as best they can, individually."² Although these architects were blamed to have turned to artistic knowledge to give fullness to their work in order to keep their acquired privileges, on the contrary this minimalist *parti pris* was often identified as counterpoint to the absolute search for creativity that was happening elsewhere at that time, where originality and inventiveness was generally sought in frantic elaboration of flying and fractured forms.³ If minimalism was used as a pejorative label to embody the 1990's Swiss production in relation with the American art of the 1960's, Donald Judd already preferred the terminology of *new work* considered as developed and complex as other art forms, whereas "minimal" depicted these new forms as a "reduction of reductive".⁴ To a certain extent, applying this definition to architecture might allow to trace back the reduction path to its origins in order to bring to light the much more contrasted context in which, from the 1980's onwards, a few architects from northern Switzerland emerged on the international scene as leading figures of a Swiss renewal.

1 Frampton, "Minimal Moralia", 325-326.

2 Di Battista, "The artist's knowledge", 77.

3 Buchanan, "Swiss essentialists", 50.

4 Leider, "Perfect Unlikeness", 98.

In the trajectory of the mannerist notion of *facade as veil*, these new contributions sought to address the envelope's autonomy as a place for mediation, an interface between image and meaning marked by a strong interest for texture and appearance either primitive or overrefined. In the urge to define a common ground on what revealed to be current concerns, this situation drove scholars to explore and define new tools which were based on transposing linguistic sciences in the field of architecture along with the directness of perception's emotive effect. In this respect, from 1980 onwards, the reformatted *archithese* journal announced a new editorial strategy in which its new editor-in-chief Martin Steinmann among other protagonists contributed to illustrate a turn in the Swiss discourse towards the building production. Although the will to approach this new production meant to participate actively in searching for its occurrences, the diversity of cultural and theoretical background of these young practitioners occasionally turned out to be of a different nature, which in some cases stressed them to adopt critical positions towards their contemporaries.⁵ Following two disruptive decades of architectural debates, architects like Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron were indebted by the post-war building boom of their high-school years, respectively in Zurich and Basel, and later on by the notable influence of Rossi at the ETH who brought back architecture as an autonomous discipline during his years as a visiting professor from 1972 to 1974. These architects would rapidly stand out of the disparate Swiss German renewal showing common interest in the relation between architecture and the city and the potential to apply—or rather redefine—Rossi's theory within a completely different heritage.⁶ In fact, cities like Basel and Zurich were essentially assimilated with twenty years of post-war urban planning.

5 This is already clear in 1985, when Michael Alder, Jacques Herzog, Pierre de Meuron and Peter Zumthor discuss the reason for using wood under various forms in their respective projects.

6 Rossi, "Architecture for Museums", 19-20.

In that regard, Jacques Herzog described his 1960's high school years as the moment he started to look at the city of Basel, defined by "the presumptuous refusal—without emotion and consciousness—to integrate the new buildings into a relationship with the city's ground plan."⁷ In fact, the rectangular character, in meanings and in the built form, made the typical elements of these cold and monotonous architectures which Herzog could isolate as genuine stylistic elements. Nevertheless, referring to the "calm objectivity" of Hans Bernoulli, Karl Moser and Otto Salvisberg, the so-called Swiss German "mediocre modernism" along with the *Neues Bauen* heritage was treated by the architects as a local vernacular and served as references for quotation into new designs, whether in an abstracted, distorted or fragmented manner, which was especially criticized by Herzog & de Meuron for its postmodernist approach: "many architects react to this 'bad and irrelevant architecture' by exaggerating references to periods of urban development that have been processed and accepted in terms of art history and urban planning".⁸ If this heritage made the landmark of Swiss German's cities, it is clear that the plodding rationality and the solid objecthood of its architecture became straightforward references for the later generations, spread as an established minimalism, an architecture which slowly revealed to be boring.

By gradually building its self-enclosing codifications from realist quotations, the Swiss production risked to become pure image devoid of any architectural criticism: "it is idiotic to make an architectural category of Realism. If one does, then it will have the same fate as rationalism, as

⁷ Herzog, "The Specific Gravity of Architectures", 204-205.

⁸ Federle and Herzog, "Künstler in der Schweiz" 50-51: "*Viele Architekten reagieren auf diese 'schlechte und belanglose Architektur' durch eine übertriebene Bezugnahme auf kunsthistorisch und städtebaulich bearbeitete und akzeptierte Perioden der Stadtentwicklung.*"

symmetry, and so many other things that are only useful insofar as they express ideas”.⁹ By allowing no room for the tradition of the new rather than the tradition of its imagery, the works were made ultimately vulnerable to different readings and Swiss German architecture gradually fell into the exaltation of its own apartness; a condition which led its production to establish itself as an international benchmark known as the *Swiss box*.

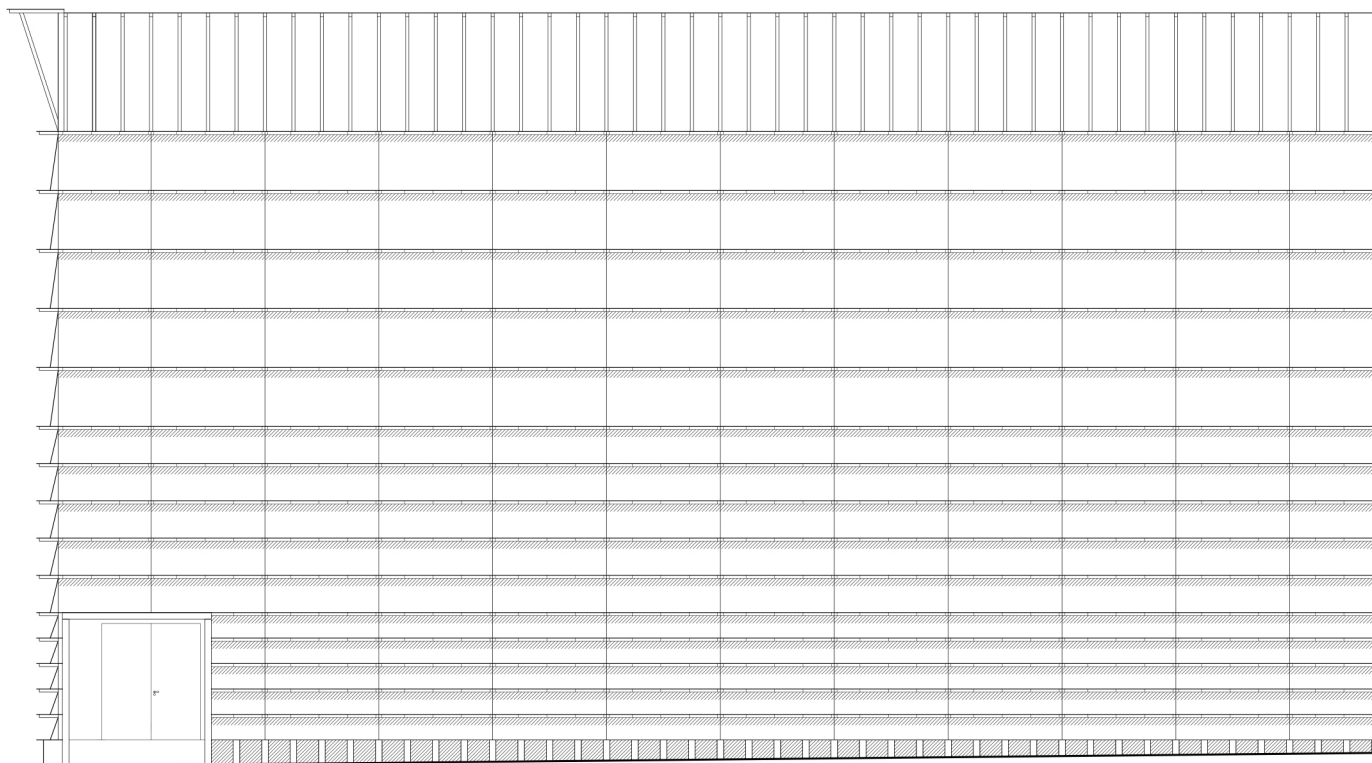
On the contrary, Herzog & de Meuron’s early production maintained from the very beginning a critical position towards these references, believing that images were to be used as an available matter among architectural tools rather than to legitimate the building’s pertinence in the urban fabric. More specifically, the 1984-1987 period seems to be a moment in which the firm develops a specific attitude towards the city, balanced between deep investigations of contemporary art and the application of Rossi’s teaching within a totally different context; varying from the building culture to the financial and technical circumstances.

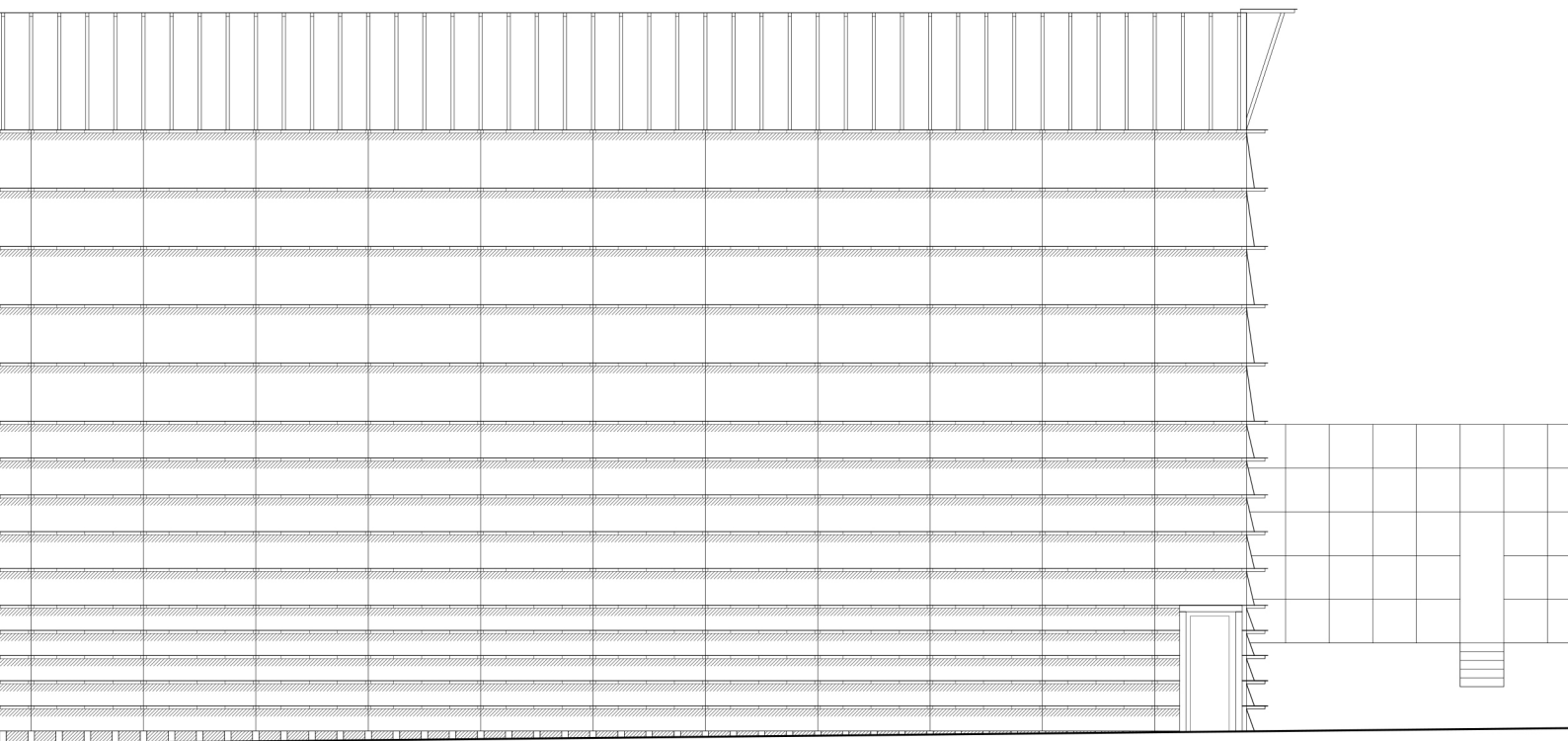
9 Rossi, “Une éducation réaliste”, 25-26.

“The model is perfect if not in intention then certainly in fact.”

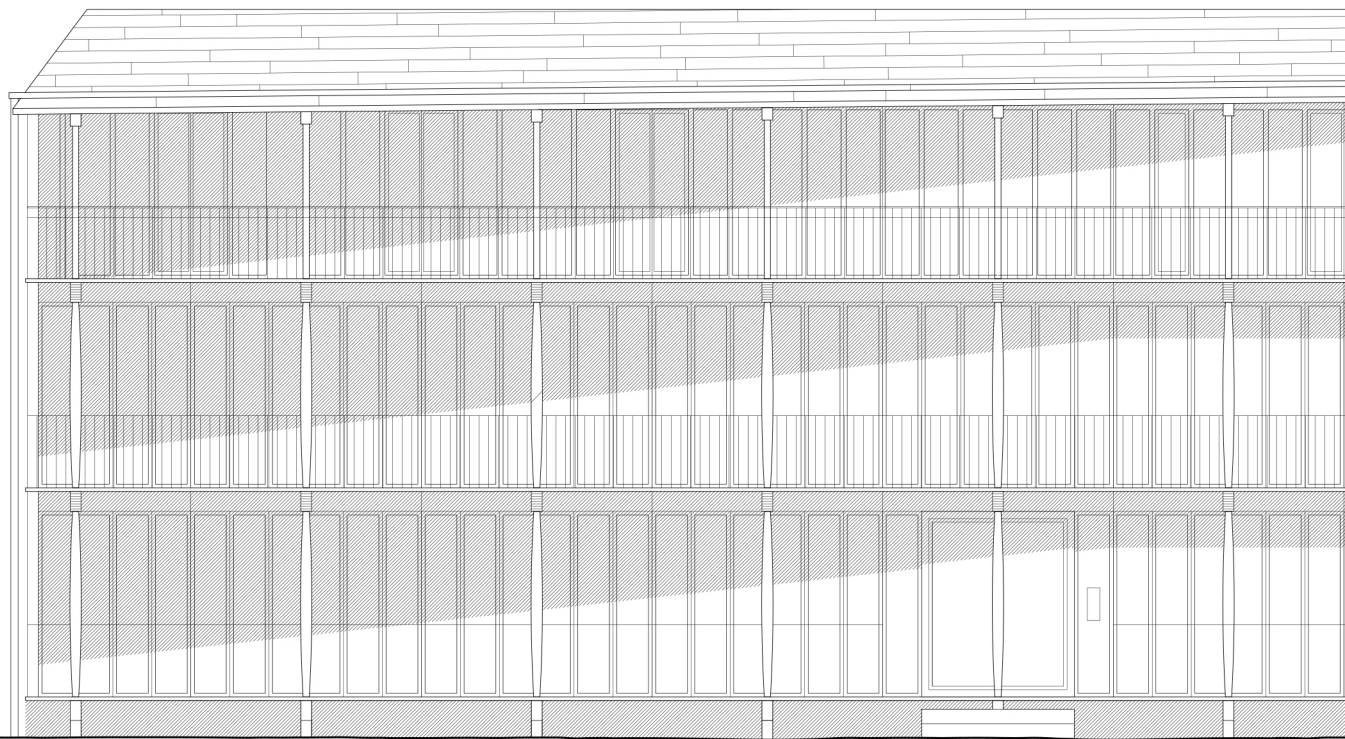
Gordon Matta-Clark, *notebook 1262*

The Model as Inverted *Boiserie*



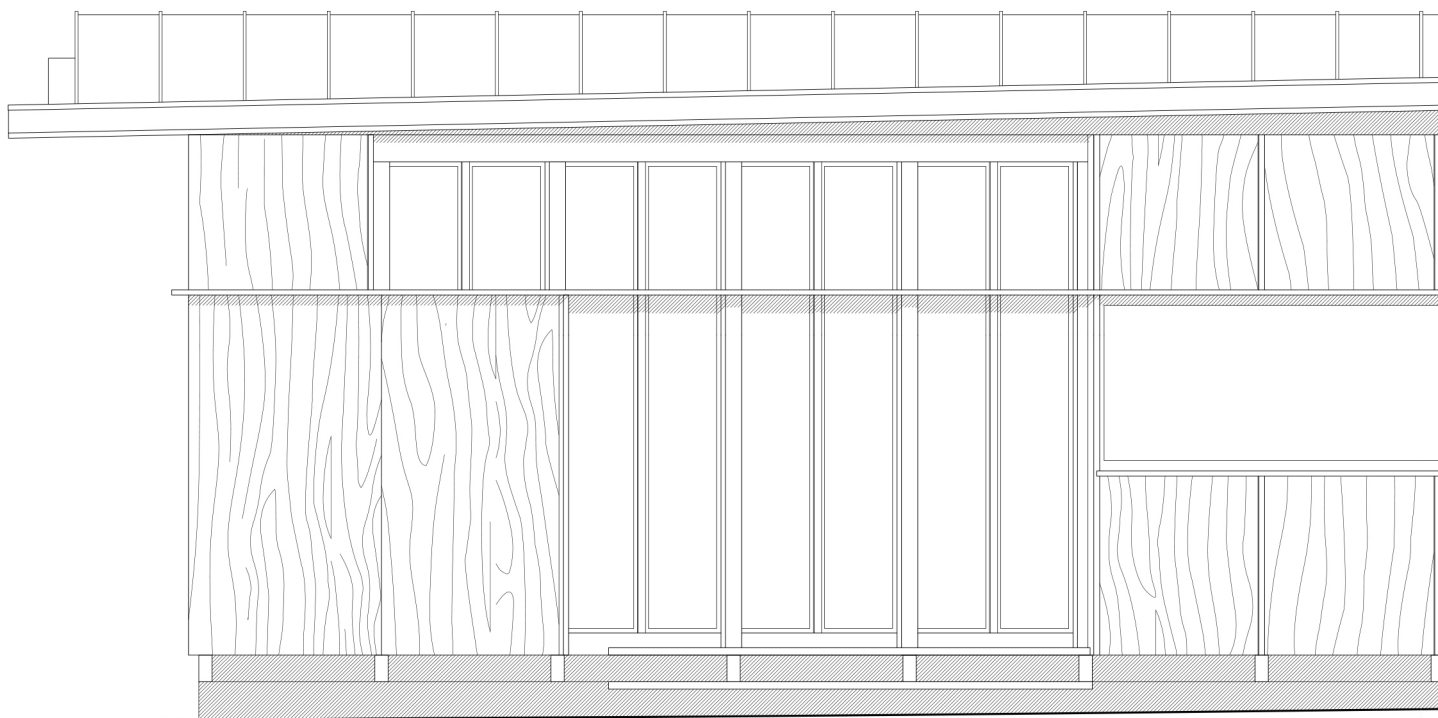


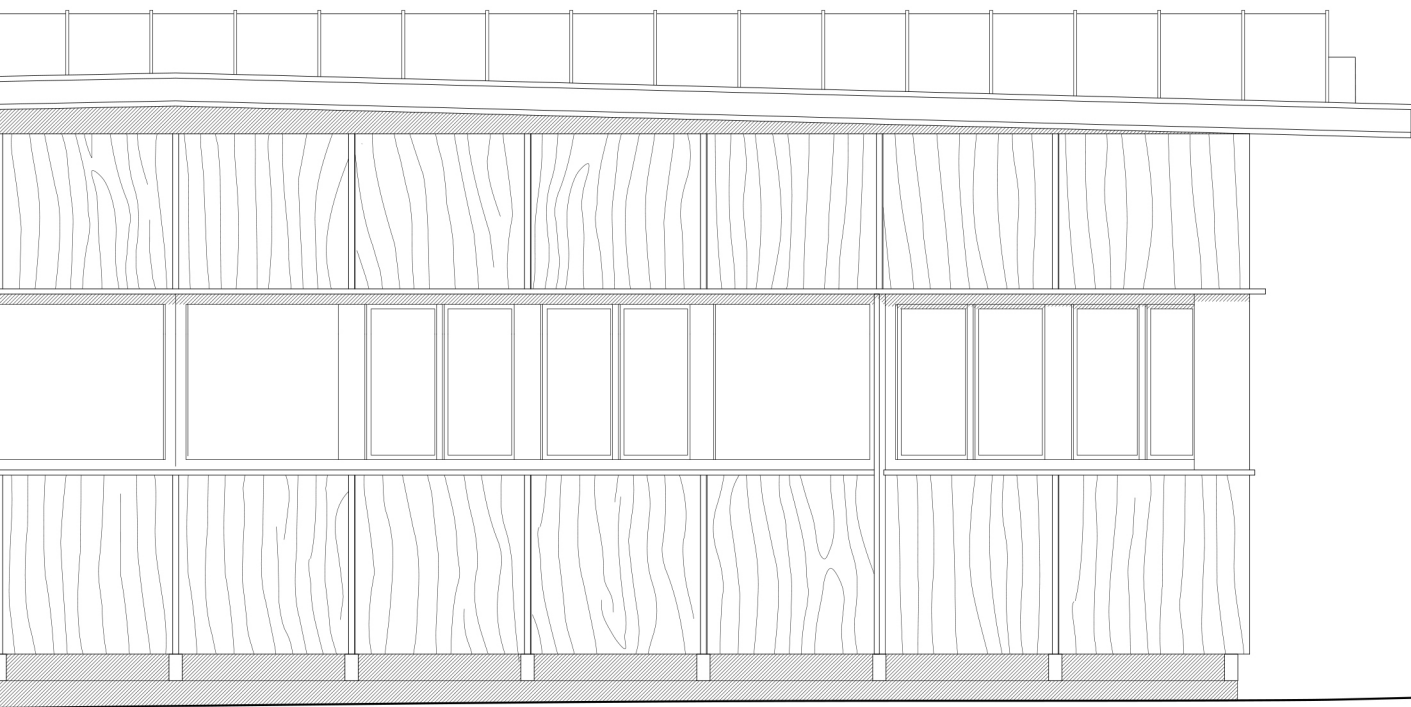
Ricola Storage Building (after Thomas Ruff), 1986-1987



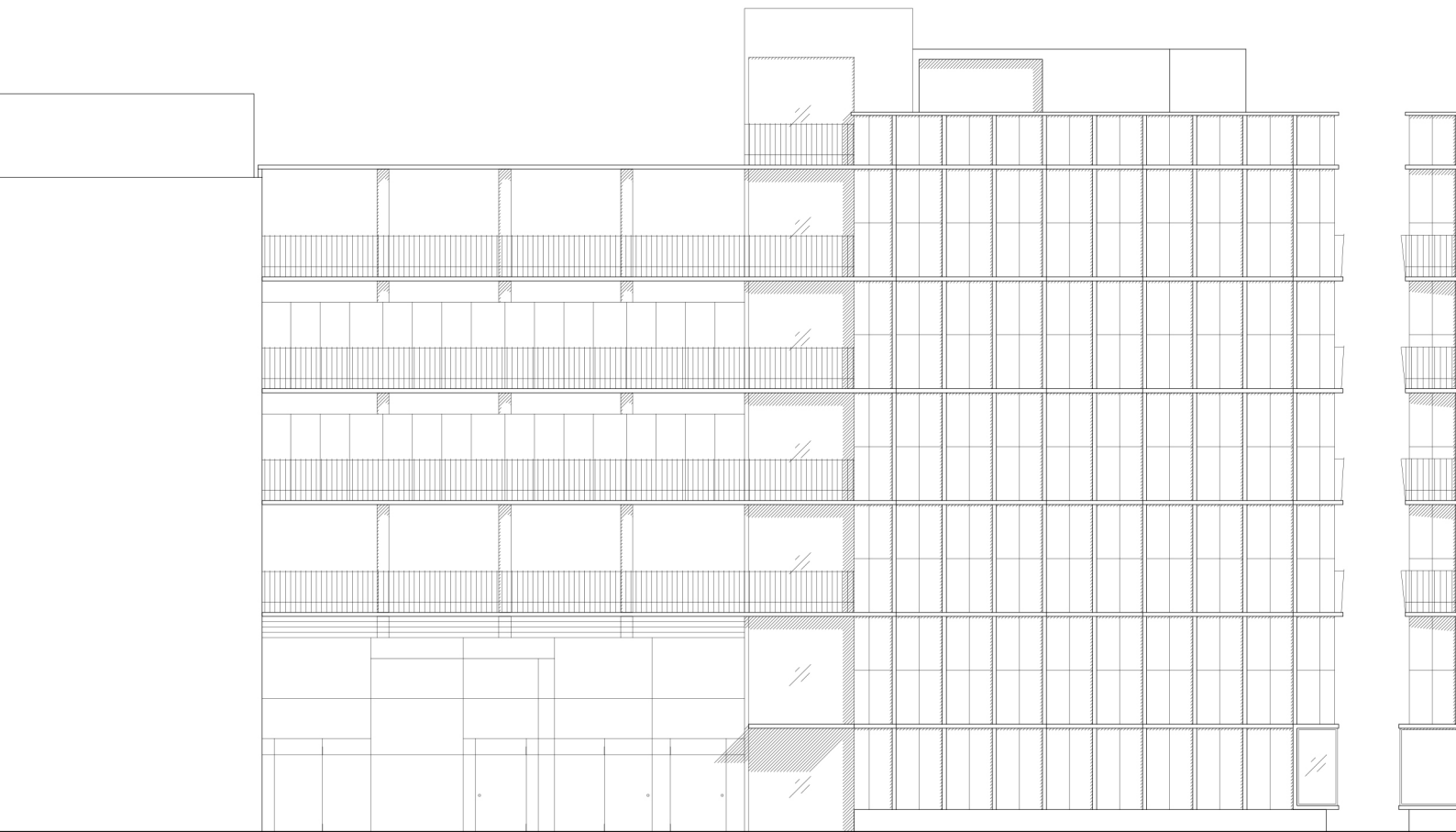


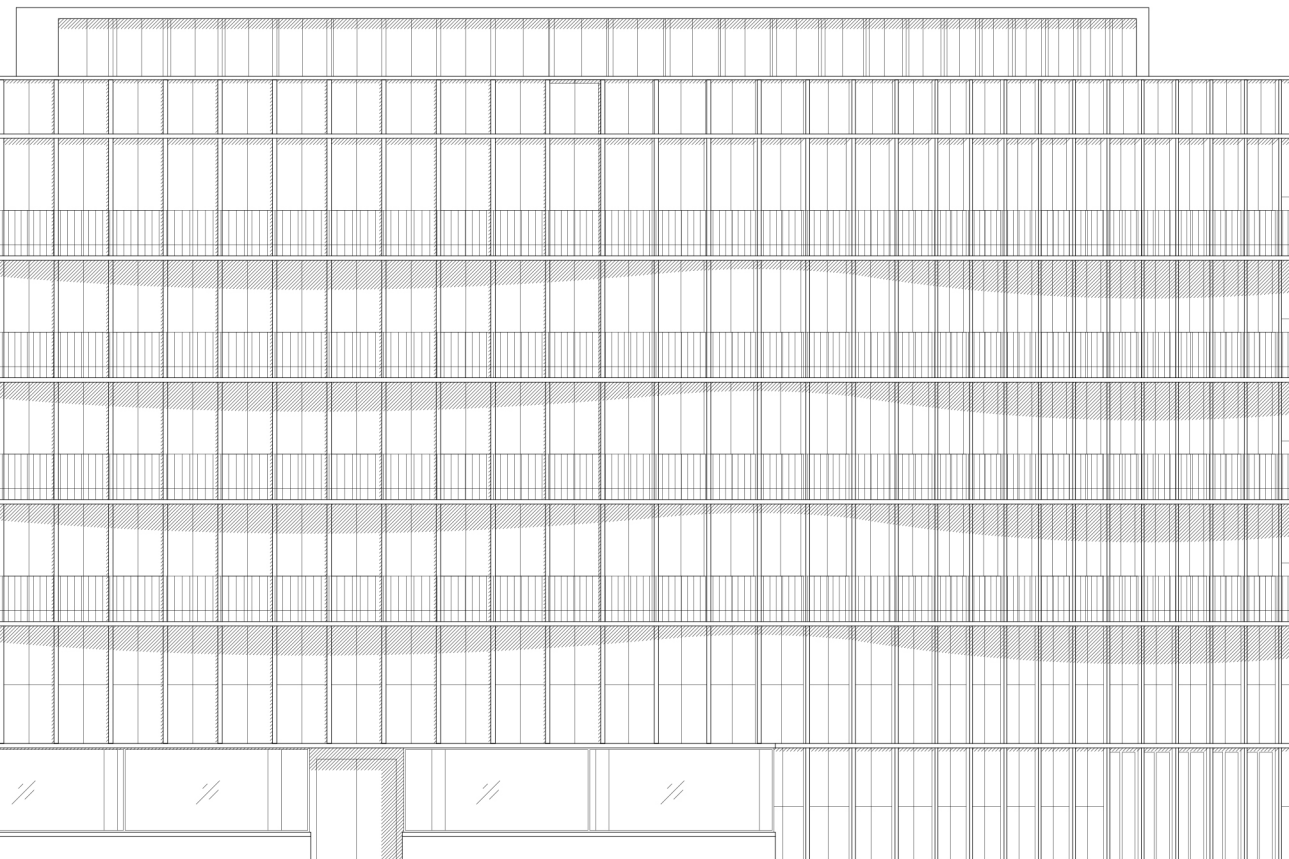
Apartment Building along a Party Wall (after Thomas Ruff), 1984-1988





Plywood House, 1984-1985





Schwitter Apartment and Office Building, 1985-1988

Since their very first exhibition, Herzog & de Meuron considered exhibiting their work as a project in itself. It was meant to free the projects from their respective contexts as an opportunity for interpretation and experimentation. Thus, for the exhibition *Architektur Denkform*, silkscreens of their built projects were printed on the glazing, each of them custom-made to fit the steel-framed windows of the building. By shifting the fragility of the building's glass shell in a *trompe-l'œil*—somehow reminiscent of Duchamp's *Le Grand Verre* (1915)—the visual overlap of these images and the building's surroundings transposed the identity of each building in an accumulation of disturbed images.¹ The idea was intentionally elusive as the natural and artificial light along with meteorological conditions contributed to the collage-like *tableau vivant*. Curious to see what kinds of information they would choose to convey, they later on asked four artists to contribute to their Venice's Biennale show with pictures of their buildings.² This was the starting point of a long collaboration with Thomas Ruff, who was asked again in 1994 to produce seven images for the Peter Blum gallery show in New York emphasizing associations with some of their exhibited models.³

During his years as a student in the Düsseldorf Art Academy, Ruff studied with Bernd and Hilla Becher where he started to produce portraits of people keeping the spare aesthetic of their work, which he then transposed to random buildings, this time again in serial form, restricting himself to only one picture. If aiming for this kind of collaboration is seen as a potential to adopt different readings on their own production, Ruff's static frontality seen in the famous photograph of the Ricola Storage Building in Laufen seems in fact to have common conceptual features with some of their earlier projects.

1 Jehle-Schulte Strathaus, "Architektur ist Denken ausstellen" 52.

2 Krischanitz and Vischer, *Architektur von Herzog & de Meuron*, 5.

3 Zaugg, *Herzog & de Meuron : eine Ausstellung*, 15.

Here the image turns the warehouse's facade into a flat surface, erasing all forms of the envelope's technical thickness. In portraying the building frontally, Ruff's picture erases as much as possible notable scale benchmarks, making it more an abstract—yet refined—object than a three-dimensional building. In that specific manner, Ruff's other famous picture of the Party Wall's model suggests familiar conditions since it bounces on the previously mentioned idea of an abstract but still refined object; already on its own, the model deliberately escapes as much as possible architectural features remaining a silent and autonomous form. Thus, if in a work of art like Rachel Whiteread's, it is necessary to see the drawings in relation to the sculptures just as it is vital to understand the creation of the volume's surfaces in the context of the drawings; it might be relevant to see the Party Wall building as a conscious transposition of the model's immediate quality on site, in which the model of the building—retroactively the object of the model—opens an ultimate potential for architecture.

Looking closely at the model, the first two floors are completely closed by the wooden shutters creating a continuous pattern which serves the row of columns as a background, while the complete black treatment of the last floor stands as a reduced crowning of the former two. The resulting blind box is laying on the table and appears to have common features with some pieces of furniture, much like a wooden cabinet. If the more “political” models made to render the building more attractive are often “annoying and embarrassing because they don't do justice to the most basic requirements of material and scale”,⁴ here, the lack of context and the 1:1 wood pattern ensuing the model's scale gives it its autonomy as a finite object.⁵ Intentionally, the furniture-like qualities relative to the model make the

⁴ Ruff and Holl, *Architectures of Herzog & de Meuron*, 29.

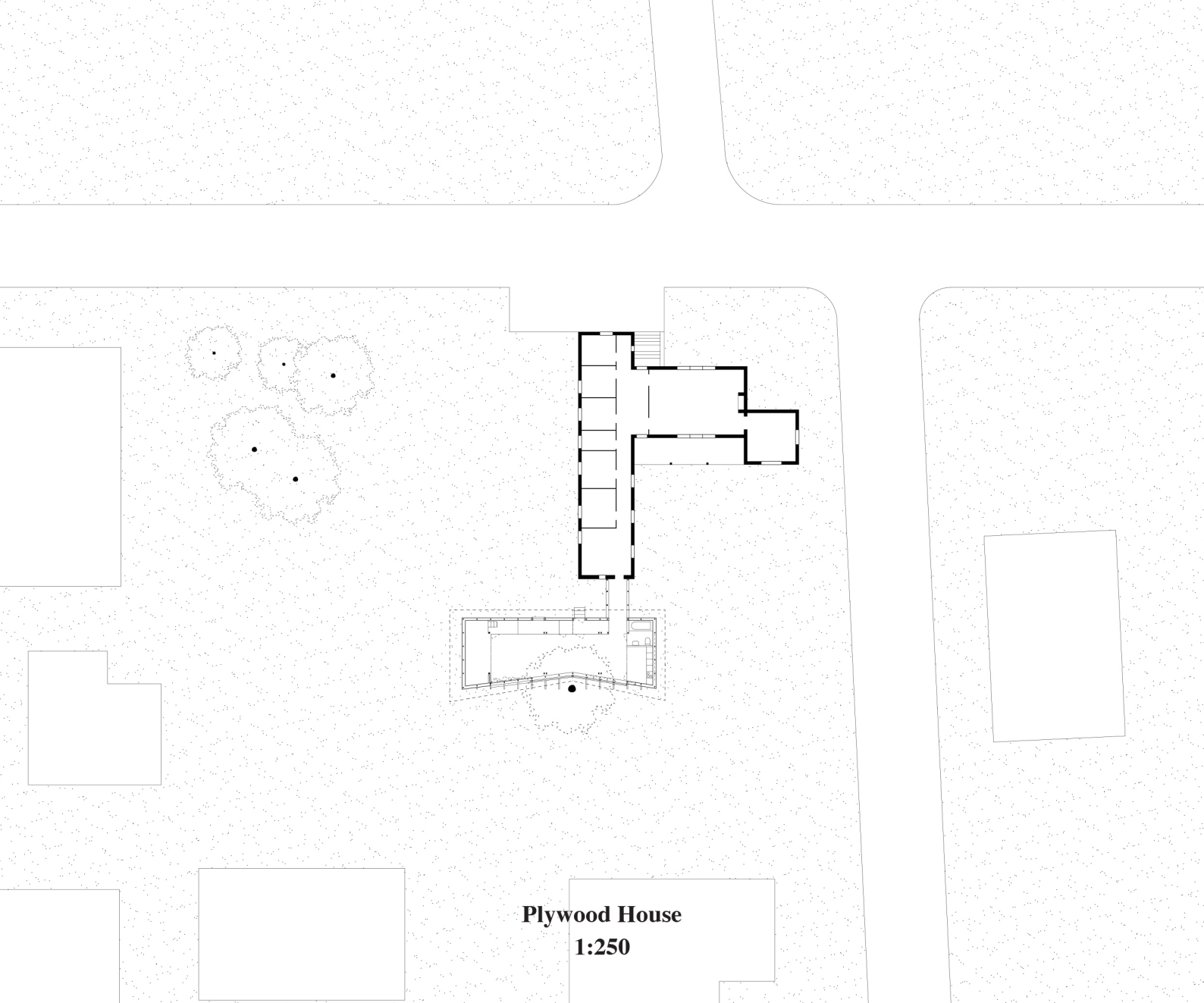
⁵ Another model of the Apartment Building along a Party Wall that can be found in Herzog & de Meuron's archives at scale 1:20 measures approximately 2 meters long, which stresses even more the inner concept of the model.

building look just like it was a bigger version of it. Going back not from the building to the model but from the model to the building and transposing this very idea in the “field”, a group of four projects built one after another from 1984 to 1987 seems to trace a genealogy where this theme is always present as a common base for their strategy—it is a time in Herzog & de Meuron’s production in which this very attitude becomes form.

In the fifth issue of *archithese* (1985), Martin Steinmann moderated a discussion between Peter Zumthor, Michael Alder, Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron with the aim to discuss their different takes on the revival of wood as a new material to be used. Disagreeing with the idea that this material could be used only for its imagery, Herzog & de Meuron referred to their freshly built Plywood House as a “piece of furniture; something handmade, precious”.⁶ Built in order to extend a residential villa, most of the published pictures stress the Plywood House as an autonomous pavilion negating the villa, not far enough to be read as a backyard shack and not close enough to simply extend the house. On the inside, the main room serves as a living room and a small theater for marionette plays which can be completely closed on itself—reminiscent of an abstracted version of Palazzo Ducal’s *studiolo*—while the ensuing space contains services such as niches, a kitchenette and a bathroom. On the outside, the above-ground foundations and the collage-like roof isolate the plywood’s homogeneous skin, echoing its interior nature in a very refined way almost like a “musical instrument”.⁷

6 Alder et al. “Bauen mit Holz”, 3.

7 Herzog and de Meuron, “The Hidden Geometry of Nature: Six Projects.”, 89.

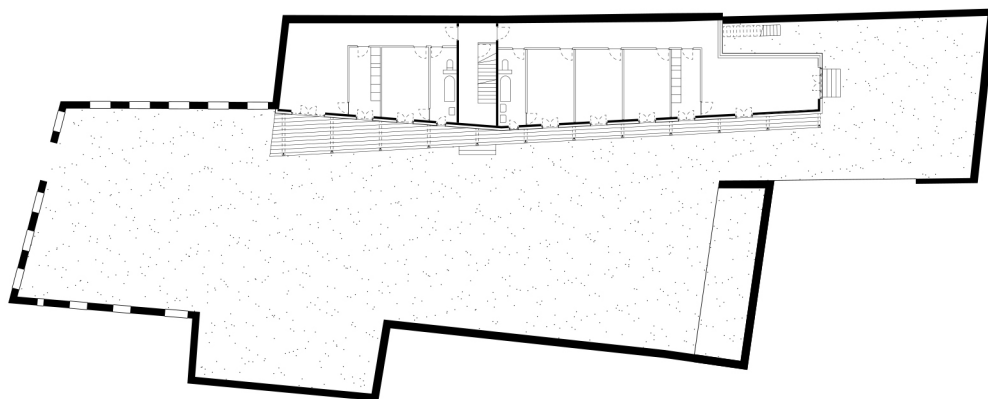


Plywood House
1:250

Although the Plywood House vehicles a will for autonomy, the variety and the precision of its articulation move beyond this very idea, establishing clear intentions with the villa's overall plan. "In backyards, the main buildings are an important urban development, as are the houses built of stone in our medieval city centers."⁸ The project testifies an attempt to take advantage of the context's lack of urbanity as a starting point for a speculative urban attitude. To that regards, all the bedrooms' views open up on the garden now framed by the extension, thus, mirroring the same kind of enclosure happening on the loggia's side of the villa. In the continuity of the narrow corridor, the bridge like extension leads to the discovery of the project's famous gesture—the bent facade and the big Paulownia tree—introducing the theme of the "arrière-cour" as an inseparable architectural entity on its own. By building an apparent dichotomy between the object's autonomy and the immediate concrete relations it establishes with its surroundings, this bipolar attitude reveals to be ultimately conciliated in the project itself. In reaction to the context's clumsiness, they exploit the furniture-like quality of the object to frame a domestic mise-en-scène in which everything is now part of a broader interior.

As depicted before in Ruff's portrait, the Party Wall model interferes with two spheres of realities: its scale and its materials create a reality on their own, a reality which is transposed as such on the building plot. Just as the Plywood House establishes relations in a not yet urban context, the very same attitude of creating an expanded domesticity is reused in the context of Basel's city center. The Apartment Building along a Party Wall is located in a narrow courtyard which connects on one side to the Hebelstrasse and remains totally enclosed by a continuous perimeter of houses. The building plot sits

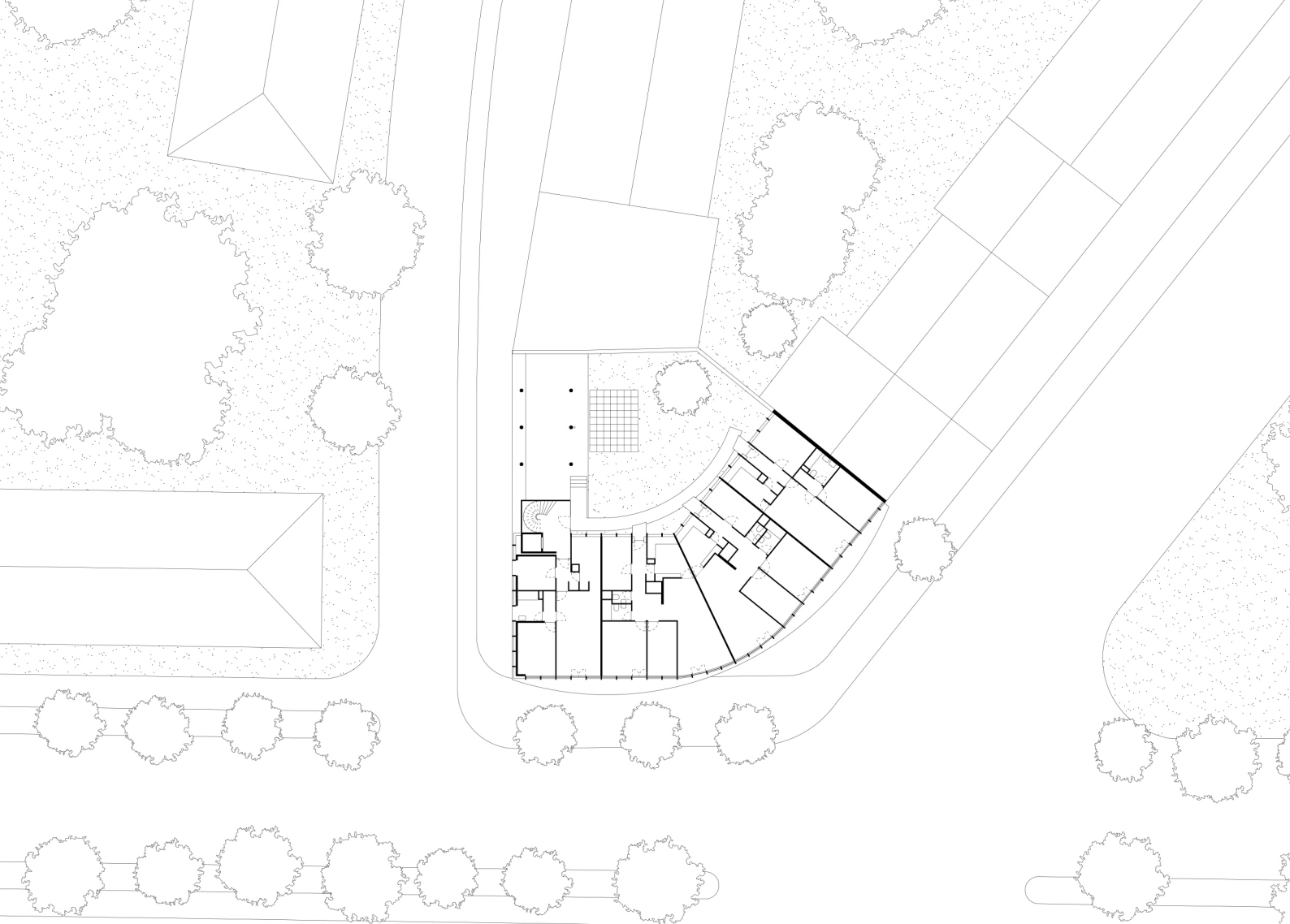
⁸ Ruff and Holl, op. cit., 29. "*In Hinterhöfen sind auch Hauptgebäude eine wichtige städtebauliche Möglichkeit, so wie die steinernen Geschlechtertürme in unseren mittelalterlichen Stadtkernen.*"



Apartment Building along a Party Wall
1:250

against a large blind wall and aligns with an existing house allowing it to open up only two sides of the envelope towards the courtyard. The principal access is located in the middle of the main facade where a central staircase distributes two different types of apartments per floor. Each of them is organized in a set of rooms connected by a continuous balcony. Apart from a set back to allow a secondary external staircase, the inner organization of the plan seems very clear and rational until it comes to the facade which addresses the context in a much more particular way.

As introduced before, the act of transposing the furniture-like model directly on the courtyard's plot shows the necessity to lose as little as possible of its potential architectural qualities. By elevating the ground floor from the courtyard and by the mirroring effect of the last floor's glazed facade, the building emphasized some of the characteristics already present in the Plywood House, but this time on a wider scale. The plywood interior of the house in Bottmingen is now turned inside-out; the act results in an inverted *boiserie* where the closed wooden shutters disappear in a continuous "figure de fond". The addition of a row of curved columns enhances this very idea; acting as a disruptive layer which now engages frontally the courtyard. It thus reinforces the narrow path between the building and the existing stone shed and gives the building a straightforward presence already from the Hebelstrasse entrance. Introduced as a straight line, this second layer moves beyond the rules introduced by the inverted *boiserie*, bringing the courtyard to life in a big set of domestic collisions.



Schwitter Apartment and Office Building

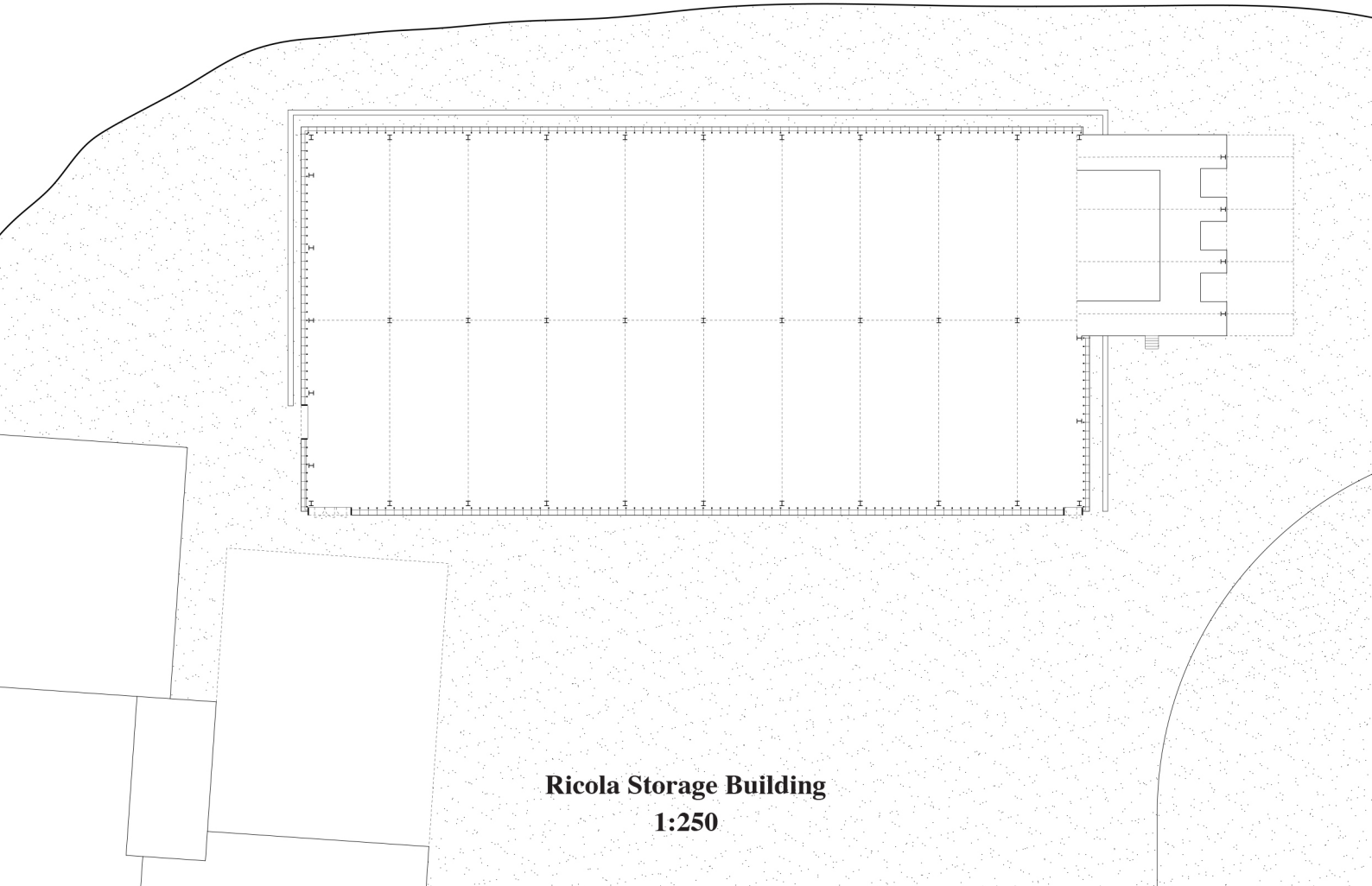
1:250

Herzog & de Meuron's relation to the city finds its sources in two essential things: the fragment and the *orientation element*. The latter relates to the city as the stage for possible urban events such as "tall buildings, topographical features or simple walkways—elements which are in fact completely traditional", whereas the former is used as "a small-scale sequencing element".⁹ Although their reading of the city echoes in some ways Rossi's theory, it seems to have undergone a certain treatment in order to transpose it in the specific context of Basel where the historical richness and the original values that persist are to be found elsewhere.¹⁰ In fact, their attitude highlights the notion of fragments to be understood in its broader sense; it can concern the plot's immediate information to be emphasized through the design process or a subjective reading of specific architectures. However, in both cases the images are used in order to be perverted; they are raw materials which can not justify any architecture but only contribute to generate it. Being very critical of the postmodernist approach of their contemporaries, Herzog & de Meuron rather use the Swiss German "mediocre modernism" heritage among other images in order to define a set of tools as given material to use freely during their design process. It is by no surprise that the Schwitler Apartment and Office Building uses Bernoulli's Realgymnasium in a clear quotation for its narrow grid's facade. Indeed, it would now

9 Bausch and Emery, *L'architecture en questions*, 41. "Il y a deux choses essentielles : le fragment et les éléments d'orientation. Ici, on pourrait parler de signes. Il est important et sensé de parsemer la ville de quelques signes : des immeubles hauts, des événements topographiques ou de simples allées — des éléments tout à fait traditionnels — il y a en fait beaucoup de possibilités. Le fragment est, en revanche, un élément d'ordonnement à petite échelle..."

10 Herzog and de Meuron, *Herzog & de Meuron : 1981-2000*, 14.

Herzog & de Meuron often hear context in its broader sense: "But what is 'context'? The word means something different to almost every architect. As we have mentioned, to Aldo Rossi it may be typological structure; to Hertzberger it may be social behavior; to Venturi it is, perhaps, billboards; to some Deconstructivist architect, it may be the challenge of chaos."



Ricola Storage Building
1:250

aim to take part in the genealogy started by Salvisberg and his Bleicherhof office building in Zurich. The main building articulates four apartments per each floor in a 45-degrees mirrored plan, allowing to create a courtyard on the back facade, which is then closed from the street by a domino structure. The curved facade overlooking the crossroad is mixed with the circular geometry of the concrete slabs creating large and continuous balconies. By referring to August Perret's repertoire, the building stresses the repetitive surface quality that helped them reinforce the building's curved appearance.¹¹ Nevertheless, here, Bernoulli's original rigidity becomes a theme to be pushed to its limits; distorted, bent, curved, in order to create a new system on its own aiming to shape and strengthen the environment's project; a system which organizes a set of fragments all based on variations of the inverted *boiserie*. The corner's detail of the Eternit envelope shows the panels liberated from the concrete grid, which ultimately makes it lose its rational role in the structure's hierarchy; the layer of Eternit now draws a clear volumetry which exists on its own. This fragmentation echoes other part of the project; a technical *boiserie* made of red-painted plywood which regulates the program requirements in the form of a gigantic piece of furniture, and—perhaps the most beautiful in its *mise-en-scène* of interiority—the plywood screens on the Domino structure which doesn't even reach the slabs, standing freely like movable shutters filtering the view towards the courtyard. To quote Martin Steinmann: "The design brings these parts into an elementary relationship through their form, a relationship in which they retain their autonomy: they appear like the parts of a construction kit, put together for a time".¹² If the Plywood House and the Party Wall building claim the argument of overreacting to existing elements as an experimental way to

11 Brausch and Emery, op. cit., 46.

12 Steinmann, "Das! : zu zwei neuen Werken", 45.

define a not yet urban discourse, in this case, this attitude blows up in a variety of declinations, where surprisingly the whole doesn't result in a saturated outcome but rather in a fragmented, yet still complete form.

Portraying fragments of architecture in the manner of specific objects, Ruff's two pictures depicts a frame of interests in which Herzog & de Meuron are able to develop a specific attitude towards the city, concealing Rossi's theory with their own historical context, forms of imperatives and radically different modes of production. While this same context enables them to generate refined architecture in terms of materials, it does not yet take control over their attitude. In that respect, if the Party Wall model reveals to extend its inner qualities by transposing them in the "field", on the contrary, having by definition no interior the Ricola warehouse seems to stand aside from the rest of the series. Having no other choice than to experiment architectural potentials through its envelope, the architects proceed to a reduction of their own attitude by emphasizing the play of the Eternit boards stacked as structural *boiserie*, somehow reminiscent of the mannerist notion of facade as veil, but still consciously rejecting the dangerous weight of images in developing a proper *raison d'être* as a specific object. It is not by surprise that the client was a dedicated collector of contemporary art who, fascinated by their recent work, saw in their approach to materials a possible way to make architecture out of a simple steel container.¹³ However, these uncommon conditions place the Ricola warehouse at the edge of this serie, as the fourth and last project announcing a turning point in their later production; considered initially as a potential to engage with its immediate context, the attitude of the inverted *boiserie* will slowly be reduced to its material—the attitude becoming a norm rather than a strategy.

13 Jehle-Schulte Strathaus, "Architektur ist Denken ausstellen", 49-50.

Rossi's Unconditional Love for Symmetry

Herzog & de Meuron's first project, the Blue House in Oberwil, was built in 1980 in a residential neighborhood on the outskirts of Basel. The project was published in January 1980 in the first issue of the reborn *archithese* journal which was dedicated mostly to Italian- and German-speaking Swiss architects born in the 1940's, reflecting Steinmann's curatorship of the influential *Tendenzen* exhibition of 1975.¹ Although the recent names of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron fitted the selection of self-conscious interpretation of ordinary architecture, yet the house doesn't seem to provide clear connections with their further work. At first sight, it is rather eclectic in the way it displays various architectural references and all sorts of quotations in one single-family house. Under its pitched roof, the Blue House reveals to be an aggregation of tools all combined in the attempt to form a complex whole. The full-glazed garden facade is reminiscent of Paul Artaria's and Hans Schmidt's House Colnaghi built in Basel in 1927 and the light structure of the floating staircase can be found in Lewerentz's Villa Edstrand, while the concrete elements on the ground floor lie somewhere between Le Corbusier's post-war work and Alighiero Boetti's late 1960's sculptures. The rest of the envelope is built with concrete bricks and concrete prefabricated elements painted ultramarine blue—reminiscent of Yves Klein's work—as a manner to unify the whole constellation in a single homogeneous object.² Finally, it is hard not to see in this built mind-map a direct homage to Aldo Rossi when the typical residential house of Basel's suburb takes the form of a monumental *Cabina dell'Elba* with its pitched roof and its circular window.

1 Davidovici, "Issues of Realism", 111-112.

2 The ultramarine blue is actually the exact same color as the Petersschule in Basel, a project well-known by the architects since they published an article in *The Village Cry* no. 3 in 1977, where they discuss the actual project along with Hannes Meyer's proposal depicting his rational attitude balanced with traditional issues.

However, Rossi's unconditional love for symmetry is lost in this very quotation. The Italian beach hut is no longer part of a static, timeless world of perfect objects; its image is used—or rather abused—in a distorted question mark announcing that something else is at stake. The addition of the steel posts canopy on the house's side is brought in a dramatic act in order to disturb the conventional form of the house. The imminent theatricality of the curved brick wall stresses the search for a contextual *mise en scène* by quoting it in the mannerist treatment of the corner's brickwork. As said by Gargiani, it is already clear, from the monstrous configuration derived from the manipulation of the ideal type, that the house can no longer be traditional.³ The significance of this gesture is to be seen in the very need for an external element; the neutrality of the context is so that it endangers the house to be reduced to a set of fragmented images. Just as Klein refuses to use any pretext, anecdotes or composition in his paintings, here this gesture highlights Herzog & de Meuron's embryonic act of self-referentiality that will open the path to further projects.

*“It is, nonetheless, absolutely indispensable that we develop new strategies of images; subversive strategies; strategies which contradict the legibility of the everyday; which raise questions rather than satisfy superfluous needs in the way that commercial television and contemporary architecture do. Contemporary architecture behaves like an advertising copywriter, it exploits the field of art, taking advantage of art in order to renew the image of its architecture without reflecting its conceptual and intellectual foundations.”*⁴

3 Gargiani, “Concrete in the early works of Herzog & de Meuron”, 160.

4 Herzog and de Meuron, *Architectures of Herzog & de Meuron*, 168.

Since the very beginning of their career, Herzog & de Meuron read the architectural production of their contemporaries as essentially indebted with the images of the *Neues Bauen* and were aware of the need to take a step aside from these images and build a wider range of references.⁵ If “the reference to a local building tradition happens anecdotally in Switzerland and not as a reflected expression of a cultural situation”,⁶ it is now clear that to overcome the risk of dialectical images, they will shift their attention to the process itself of using such images, as an available material to be brought into the design process.

5 Herzog, “The Specific Gravity of Architectures”, 205.

6 Federle and Herzog, “Künstler in der Schweiz”, 55.

Blue House

1980



Plywood House

1985



*Apartment Building
along a Party Wall*
1988



*Architektur, Skulptur,
Drei Arbeiten*

Jacques Herzog

1986

Stampa Gallery, Basel



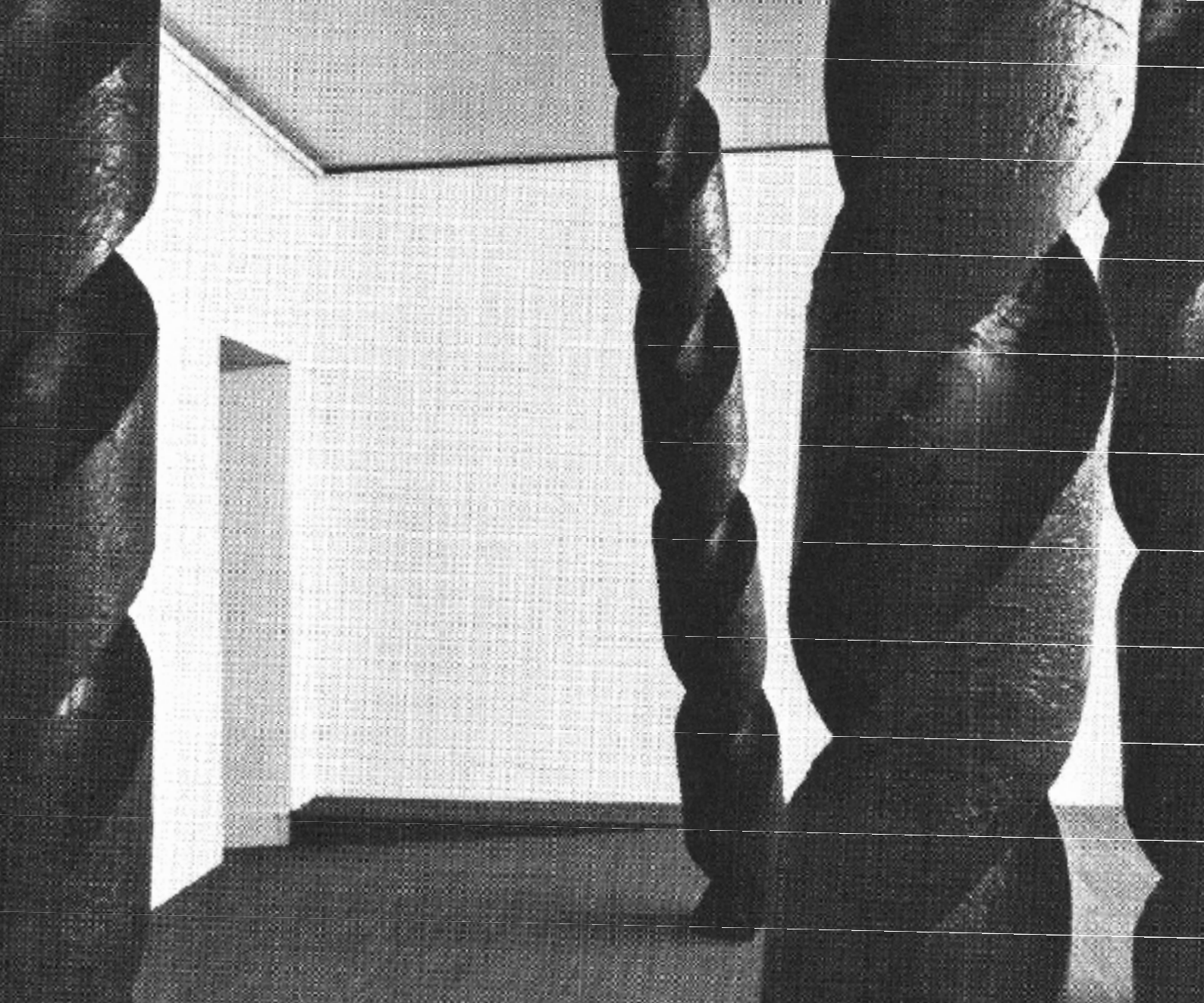
Architektonische Installation

Jacques Herzog

1983

photo: Pierre de Meuron

Stampa Gallery, Basel



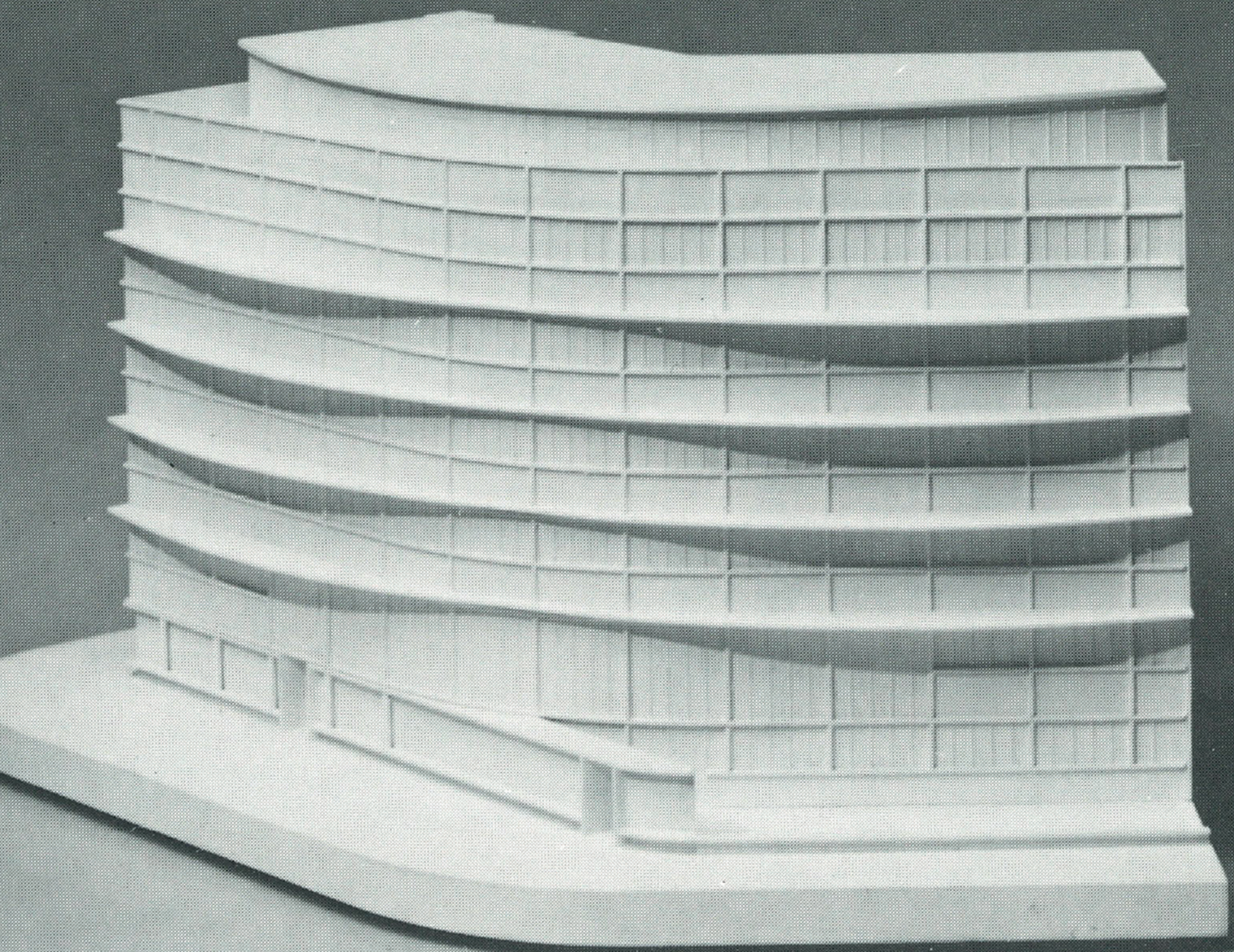
Grande Femme debout I

Alberto Giacometti

1960



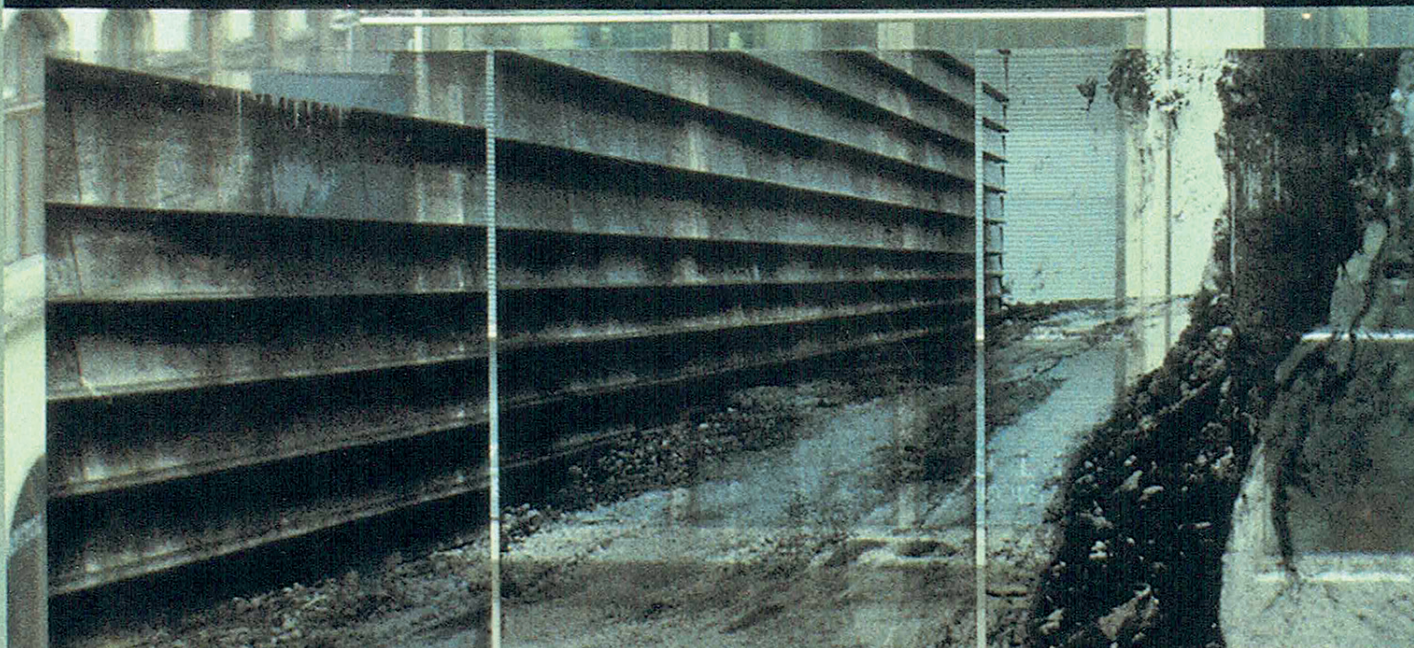
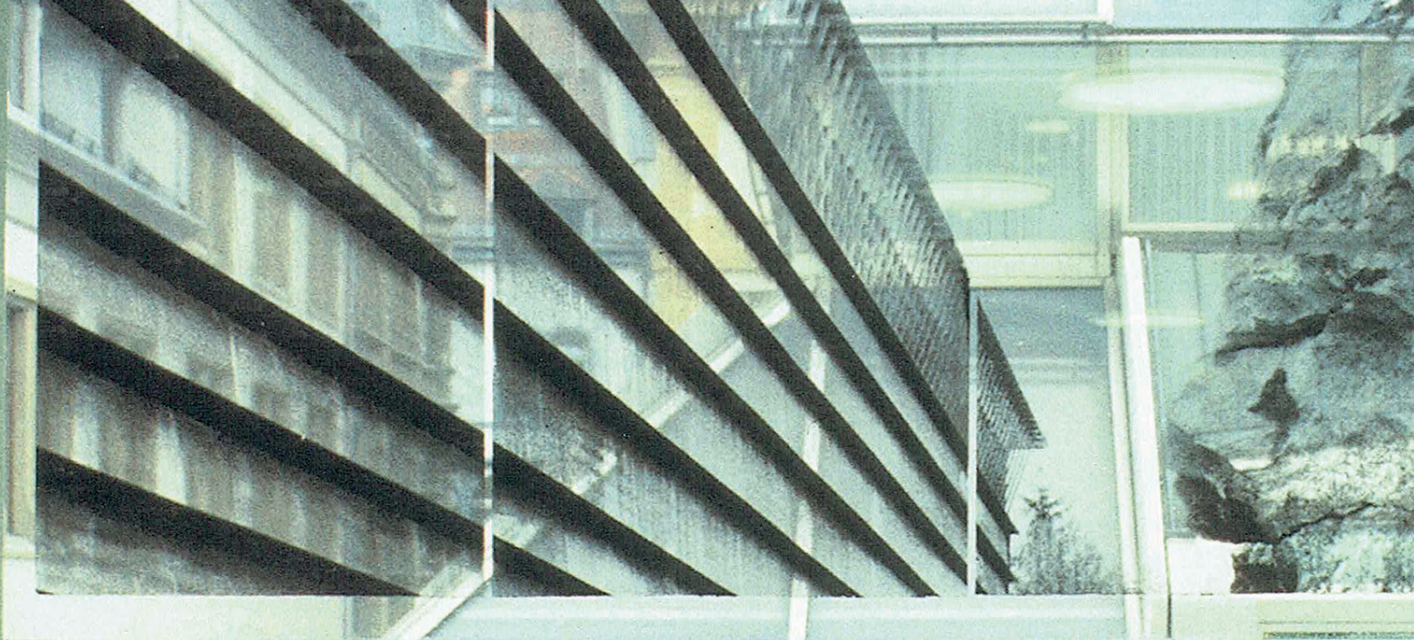
*Schwitters Apartment
and Office Building*
1988
early version model



*Schwitter Apartment
and Office Building*
1988



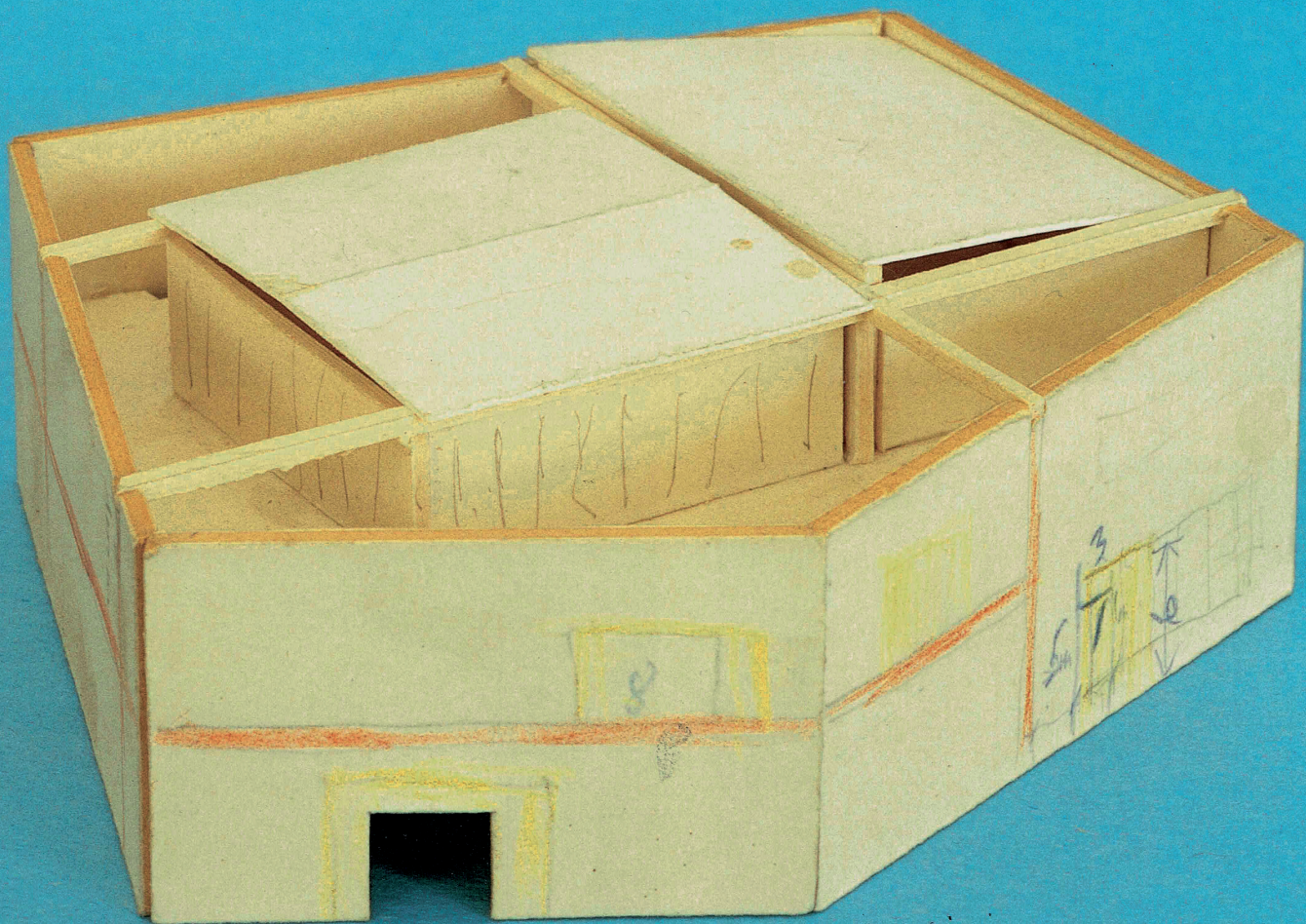
Ricola Storage Building
silkscreen, *Architektur Denkform*
1988



Goetz Gallery
1992



Visp Theater
study model
1984



Exhibiting Architecture

In an article published on the occasion of Herzog & de Meuron's first exhibition, Bruno Reichlin argues that during the 1970's, architecture exhibitions were a place of renewed enthusiasm for the naturalist quality of perspective rendering which for a long time was undervalued, scorned, and questioned. From Cantafora's *Città analoga* (1973) to the built images of the *Strada Novissima* Venice Biennale, large-format perspective views seemed especially appropriate for an architecture that placed a precise, unified image in the foreground. On the contrary, the 1980's production of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron seems to highlight a totally different, perhaps even contradictory, approach. Using the Ricola warehouse as a case study, Reichlin stresses that the building "contrasts with the amorphous, insignificant square on which it stands, as if placed there coincidentally, and insists on the 'corridor' created between the building and the stone wall behind it ... The total picture is finally far less important than the image subsequently formed by our perception and exploration of the area."¹ As a matter of fact, Thomas Ruff's picture portraying the building as a "global icon", to use Reichlin's words, turns out to be far from the reality of the site: pictures taken from the sides reveal that the artist removed the background to avoid any disruption in the reading of the image.² The act of reinforcing the two-dimensionality in the portrait displays the project stripped of its context, taking with it the very nature of their relationship. Nevertheless, Herzog & de Meuron's theme of stratification used in the Eternit panels and the resulting bluntness of the whole shows a clear intention of *mimesis* in activating the quarry wall as a referent. At first seen as an opportunity for the project to turn away from the clumsiness of the existing factory's layout, by underlining this selected piece of context, the "corridor" depicted in the article becomes a

1 Reichlin, "Objectlike", 109.

2 Davidovici, "The Dilemma of Authenticity I", 2.

particular place in the project, a necessary condition for the warehouse, somehow architecture in itself. Just as it was experimented in the Blue House, architecture is no longer only about the envelope; the focus has been displaced between the apparent autonomy of the object and its immediate context. In short, Herzog & de Meuron's early production can be understood in this trajectory, where the project finds—or rather defines—the conditions to set itself within a broader architectural intention.

The difference between the three-dimensional object and its reduced version to a flat image is reminiscent of Donald Judd's 1964 manifesto on *Specific Objects*. Back then, Judd aimed to define a frame of interest in the field of American art by ferociously opposing it to what he called the "European look". The latter was seen as too often wrapped in mystery, hidden meanings and suggestive philosophical depths where the former, on the contrary, claimed the importance of three-dimensionality as a space to move into: "A work can be as powerful as it can be thought to be. Actual space is intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a flat surface."³ It is by no surprise that Jacques Herzog recalls seeing Judd's drawings back in the early 1970's at the Kunstmuseum in Basel. He describes Judd's art aspects of neutrality, redundancy, and form based on three dimensions as impressive in the lack of decoration and in the direct way they communicate the artist's idea.⁴ It might be relevant to know that before Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron had even officially established their office, they identified his attitude as a potential for architecture—at least something to start from—and published an article in

³ Judd, *Specific Objects*, 8.

See Philip Leider on Donald Judd's new-work in *Artforum* 6, no. 38 (February 2000): "The values 'conspicuous' and 'obvious' (both preferred over 'subtle') are basic to Judd's aesthetic. Indeed, he sees them as equivalent to what he often means by 'American' art and what he means by «European» art. That is, American art is large, blunt, audacious; European art is small, fussy, intricate, and full of nuances."

⁴ Ruff and Holl, *Architectures of Herzog & de Meuron*, 32.

a local art magazine with the aim to apply Rossi's theory of the city at the basis of their concerns along with Judd's so-called "new work".⁵ Architecture must appear natural, as if it had always been there. It can be discreet and banal, yet unique and incomparable. They affirm that working on such architecture can actually be compared to the act of exhibiting, as it involves presenting materials and to a larger scale updating a landscape.⁶ Here, "the act of exhibiting" probably finds its sources in Rémy Zaugg's dream museum in assuming mobility and autonomy between both the building and the human being as preconditions for architecture. Zaugg's contribution to their work started early on with the publication of *Die List der Unschuld* published in 1982 which can be seen as a pre-collaboration and developed as such that for a long time he was even considered as the third partner in the office.⁷ Following Judd's path, his critical thinking on art and architecture certainly participated in defining the conditions in which the envelope would be susceptible to overcome the role of the image.⁸

The Apartment Building along a Party Wall is an interesting case study because it participates to this very idea, except that in contrast to the Ricola warehouse, it doesn't reveal existing qualities but rather create its own ones. In fact, the row of columns on the main facade seems almost detached

5 Herzog and de Meuron, "Rationale Architektur Und Historische Bezugnahme", 21.

6 Zaugg, *Herzog & de Meuron : eine Ausstellung*, 48. Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1996. Print.

"Die Arbeit an solcher Architektur kann tatsächlich mit dem Ausstellt verglichen werden, da es darum geht, Materialien zu präsentieren, eine Landschaft zu aktualisieren."

7 Zaugg, op. cit., 38.

8 Zaugg, *The Art Museum of My Dreams*, 7. Rémy Zaugg on perception and the importance of the place: "The problem of the presentation of the work to the human being and of the human being to the work seems to stem from the autonomy and mobility of both, assuming that mobility does not stem from expressive sovereignty...They (the work and the human being) no longer can nor want to be decorative figures among other decorative figures in a gallery or Baroque reception room."

from the rest of the building. They are not there to rationally organize the facade in a classicist will, but rather in an intention to engage with both the courtyard and the building mass by intensifying their relations. Like in Meyerhold's staging of *The Government Inspector* in which the characters are surrounded by a polished boiserie in a "tableau vivant", the inverted *boiserie* of the wooden shutters serve as a background figure, a stage which frames and amplifies the columns; just as the folding of the facade emphasizes each of them as same but different.⁹ This scenic play is even more reinforced while the floors and the beams extend more and more on each level; the columns are gradually disappearing as structural elements and acquire an ambiguous necessity. Thus, by assuming the complexity of the plot, the building reinforces its narrowness by making it a strategy to engage frontally the surroundings, stressing all courtyard's sides.

In order to see these early years in a different light and the possible origins of this ambiguous necessity, it might be significant to recall Jacques Herzog's artistic practice, which he developed aside from their production in Basel at that time.¹⁰ Even though he clearly recognizes the autonomy of the two disciplines, the art scene in Basel seemed more concerned and critical of their time than among their contemporaries in architecture. The nature of his art stems specifically from the lack of projects of the early years which limited their chance to explore architecture through unknown or atypical materials and forms — such as bitumen, colored pigments, turned wood or asphalt forms — which by contrast was

9 See: Vsevolod Meyerhold's 1926 mise-en-scène for Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* where the entire decor consists of a row of polished mahogany surfaces, with 11 doors facing the public.

10 Ursprung, *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History*, 13.

made possible due to the support of some local galleries.¹¹ Just as their collaborations with artists mean to influence their own architectural conception, art must be understood as a field of experimentation, in their words as a way “to get some new blood flowing in the veins of architecture”.¹² Coming back to the Apartment Building along a Party Wall built between 1987 and 1988, interestingly enough in 1986 Jacques Herzog made an installation at the Stampa gallery where he transformed the third exhibition space into a room, by adding parquet floor and a row of four spindle-shaped columns rising from the floor to the ceiling on a central axis. Here, the columns present almost the same exact features as the ones from the Hebelstrasse courtyard, they are easily recognizable with their elegant curved feature, the only difference being that both extremities are now too reduced to express any structural purpose; they become structural ghosts exhibited in a room, maybe even pathos artifacts of a disturbed architecture but yet escape to be reduced to simple sculptures.

In fact, if Jacques Herzog stresses that architecture, in terms of attitude, is analogous and yet clearly distinguishable from art by virtue of the different preconditions of each discipline; that what stands for the quality of a work must be seen and searched for within these preconditions, here the column adopts a critical posture.¹³ This very ambiguity arises proportionally to the loss of hierarchy

11 Zaugg, *Herzog & de Meuron : eine Ausstellung*, 29. Jacques Herzog: “Ich machte mehrere Ausstellungen in schweizerischen Kunstgalerien, insbesondere bei Stampa in Basel, einer Galerie, die auf junge Künstler und experimentelle Kunst spezialisiert ist ... Insbesondere wollten wir mit Materialien und Formen experimentieren, die in der Architektur unbekannt oder untypisch waren, wie Bitumen, Farbpigmente, Formen in gedrechseltem Holz oder Asphalt, an die Wand geklebte Schrift usw.”

12 Brausch and Emery. *L'architecture en questions*, 47. “Grâce à l’apport des arts, nous cherchons à faire couler un peu de sang neuf dans les veines de l’architecture, l’analyser d’un point de vue extérieur est un catalyseur nécessaire pour sa survie dans une société en mutation.”

13 Herzog and de Meuron, *1978-1988*, 206.

between the role of Jacques Herzog artist and Jacques Herzog architect. Is this a moment in which the personal imagery developed throughout his artistic experimentations finds itself concealed in one difficult act with architecture? Could it be that he simply uses the gallery as an institution providing funds which are deliberately used to explore formal aspects of his work? In any case, once transposed in architecture this ambiguity lies there, even reinforced by its preconditions, as a manifestation of the dichotomy between the building skin and its inner organization. No matter whether the Party Wall columns come from the ones exhibited in the gallery or the opposite; the spindle-shaped finds its reason in the Party Wall's pragmatic posture towards the buckling point, which ultimately prevents the facade from falling into a superficial touch. Auguste Perret would say: "Whoever dissimulates a pole commits a fault. Whoever makes a false post commits a crime."¹⁴ However, is this still relevant to columns that are backed up by a concrete wall? What is certain is that the need to emphasize the relationship between the building's courtyard and its terrace in an extended domesticity is proportional to the structure's lack of interest in being potentially involved in the dwellings as a spatial element.

By displaying layers of diffusion and dissimulation, Herzog & de Meuron are able to soften the building's initial harshness which reveals a deliberate strategy to separate roles assigned to the skin of buildings and their interior planning.¹⁵ As a manner to prevent themselves to adopt the same attitude as their contemporaries, they simultaneously integrate form, structure, materials and context as variables in the project; strategies to emphasize the real, to assert presence, to not fall in

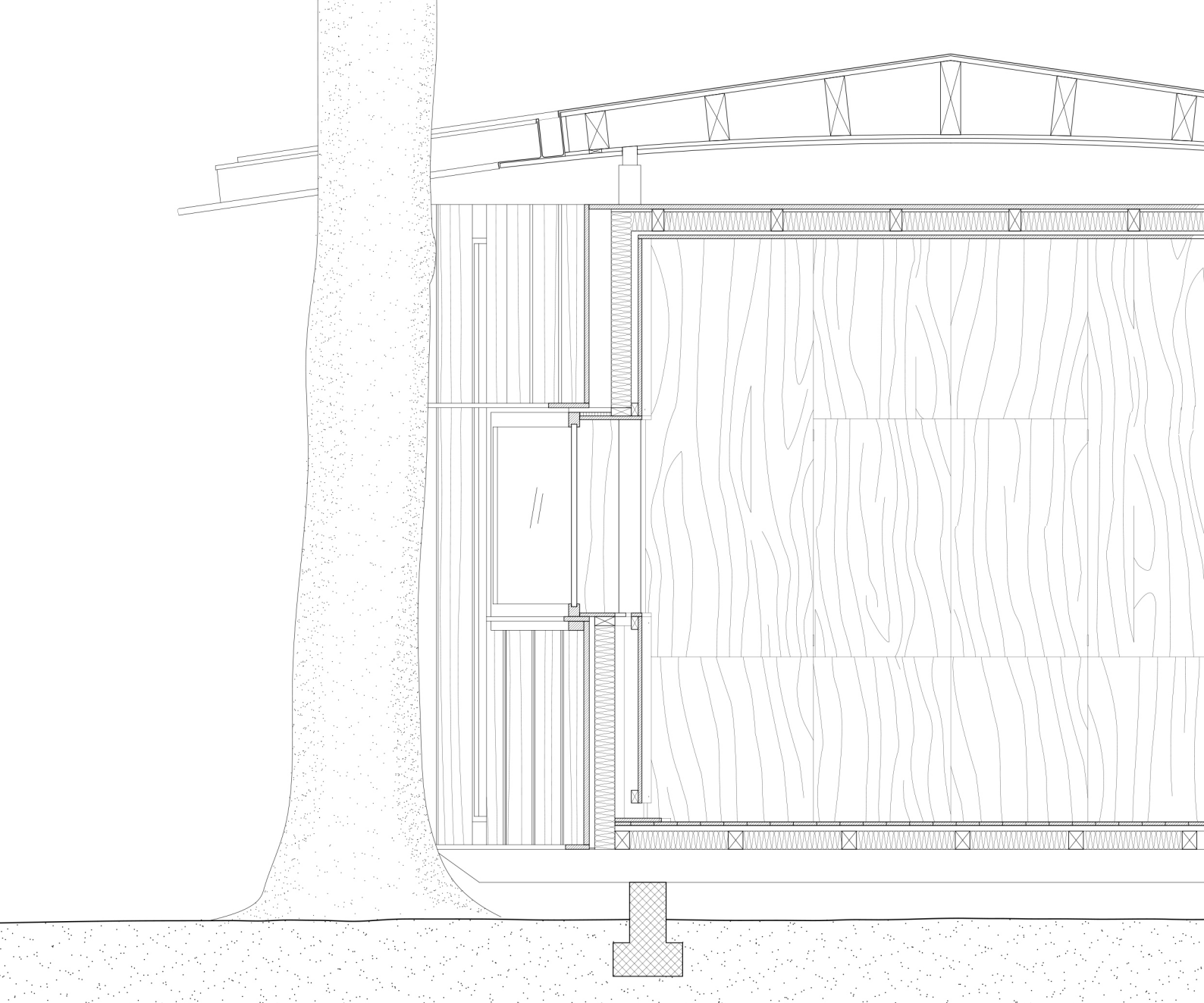
14 Perret, *Contribution à une théorie de l'architecture*, 47. "Celui qui dissimule un poteau commet une faute. Celui qui fait un faux poteau commet un crime."

15 See Koolhaas in Ruff and Holl, *Architectures of Herzog & de Meuron*, 23.

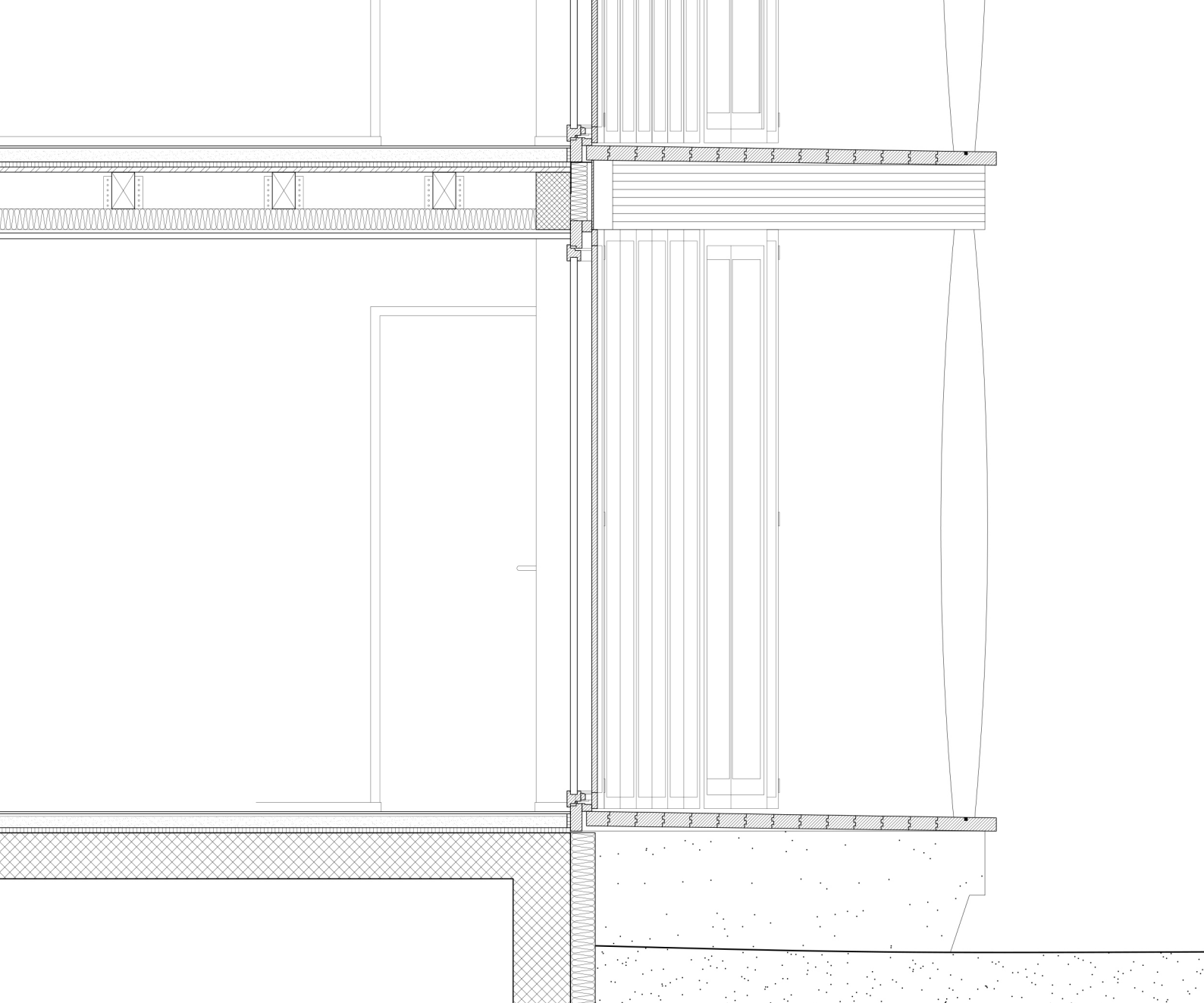
the usual simulated or mediated discourse on envelope. On the contrary, as it is already clear in the Plywood House, this apparent fragmented approach is driven by the project's will to define its own context. If Herzog and de Meuron's apparent preference for autonomous objects can be found in their intimate perception of Basel as an urban environment characterized by abrupt disjunctions, it is the concept understood as a strategy which "gives [them] the freedom to reinvent architecture with each new project rather than consolidating [their] style."¹⁶

As depicted before, the Schwitter housing brought these very concerns to a broader scale, in which Bernoulli's initial grid is reduced to a shapeable mask engaging specifically with each side of the surroundings; facing the crossroad, it extends its apparent role as a curtain wall onto large balconies, while radically reducing itself into a domino structure on its back facade. This formal play is beautifully pushed to its very limits when what seems to be one of the domino structure's slab reveals to be nothing more than a bench for the courtyard, in a familiar gesture as Le Corbusier's Couvent de la Tourette where a part of the monolithic structure is cut out to be used as a bench in a *still life* composition. In the end, this example amongst others participates to show that their main interest doesn't rely on the rationalist idea of structure as a spatial theorem, but rather in the dissolution of architecture's system of hierarchy in a set of horizontal tools, where a wooden shutter and a concrete skeleton can be developed on the same level and within the same architectural purpose.

Plywood House
section 1:25



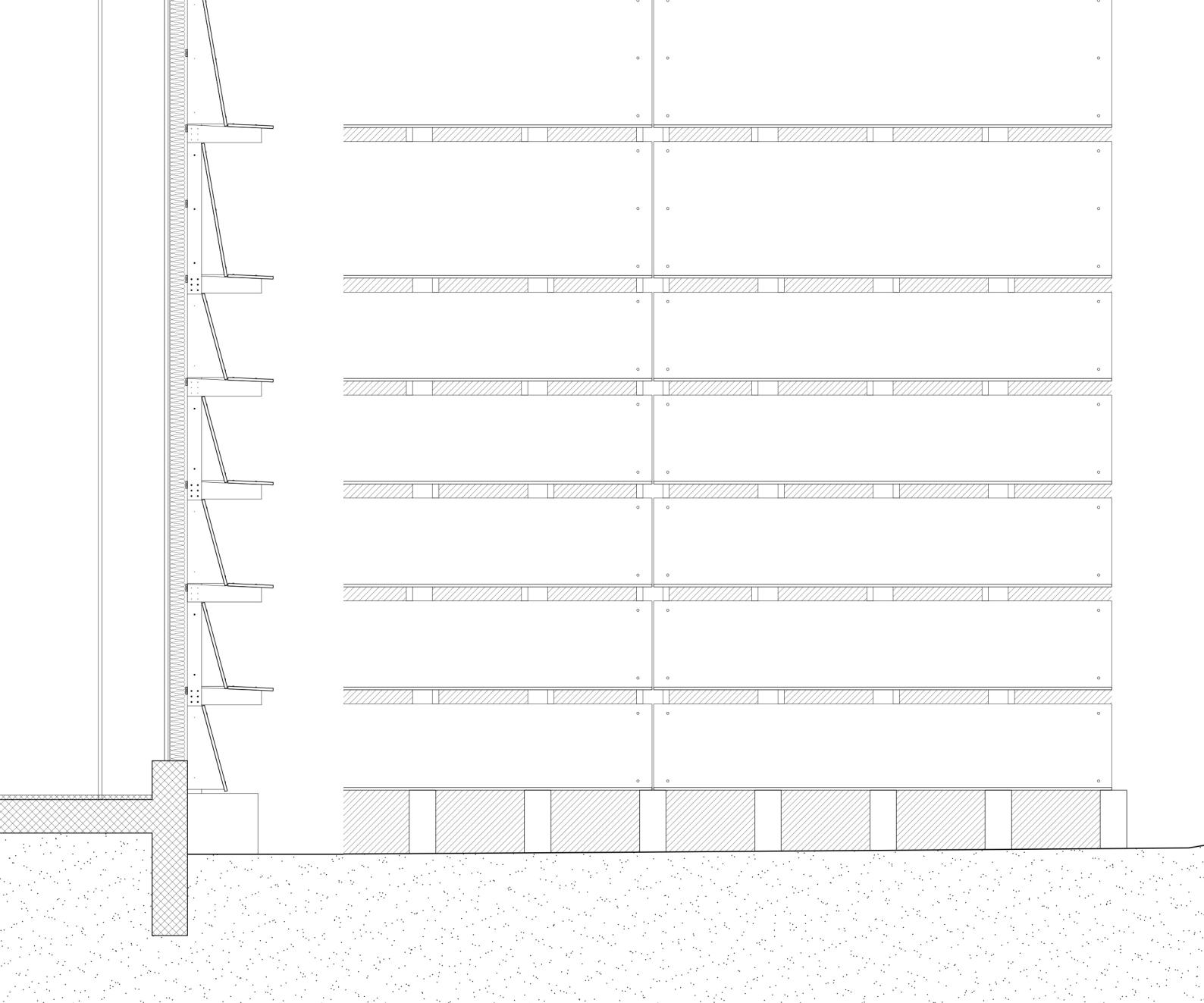
Apartment Building
along a Party Wall
section 1:25



Schwitters Apartment
and Office Building
section 1:25



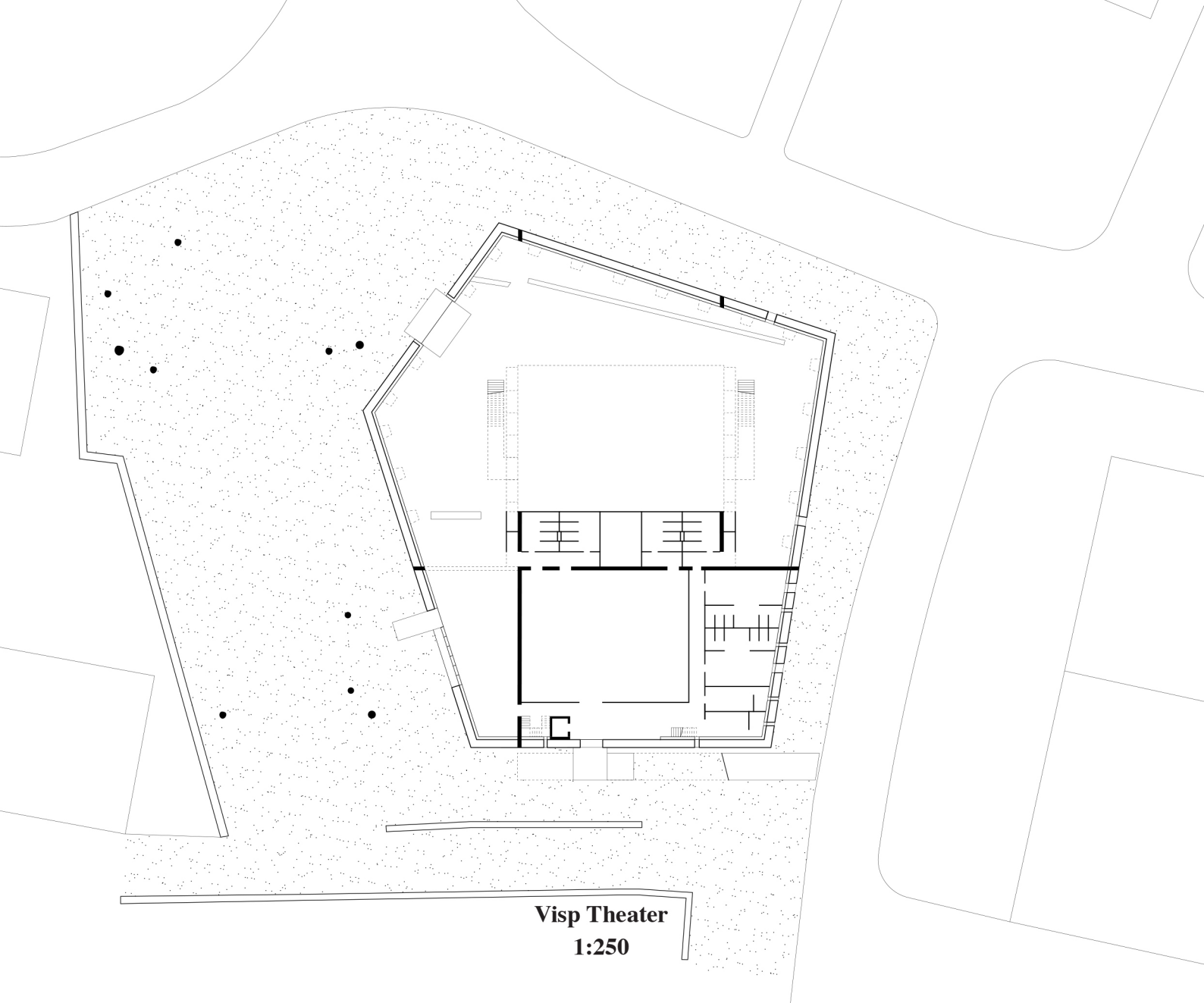
Ricola Storage Building
section 1:25



The Visp Theater

Herzog & de Meuron's Visp theater is perhaps the most important project of the office's first decade and yet it wasn't built. Situated on the threshold between their early 1980's experimentations and the four projects series from 1984 to 1987, the competition's proposal stands as an isolated case from the rest of their production in which architecture seems at first reclusive of the lack of context, generating its own conditions to produce a condensed and introverted urban fact which will reveal to be reversible as a stage for instant urbanity, an open hand for the community of Visp as a civic understanding of the theater. From these very conditions, the Visp theater conceals the autonomy of the object with the making up of its immediate context within two different scales, which sometimes overlap as a manner to bring their attitude to its absolute nature.

The competition took place from December 1983 to June 1984 with the aim to design a multi-purpose facility for the community of Visp serving the cultural life of the municipality in the broadest sense. It should be able to host association events of varying sizes and more generally, concerts, opera and plays. Even though the project was criticized for not meeting certain program criteria, it nevertheless finished in the top places and was awarded a prize by the jury, including Luigi Snozzi and Bruno Reichlin. The plot was located on the outskirts of Visp marked by its barely defined architecture of parking lot, children's playground, residential buildings and became the starting point for the theme of the envelope by pushing forward aspects of the Stone House, a work in progress at that time. As highlighted in Herzog & de Meuron's competition site plan, the project refers to the retaining wall of two churches in the medieval village, which are located a hundred meters from the plot, as a first attempt to deal with the "lost situation of the site, where quarters are placed with an incomprehensible

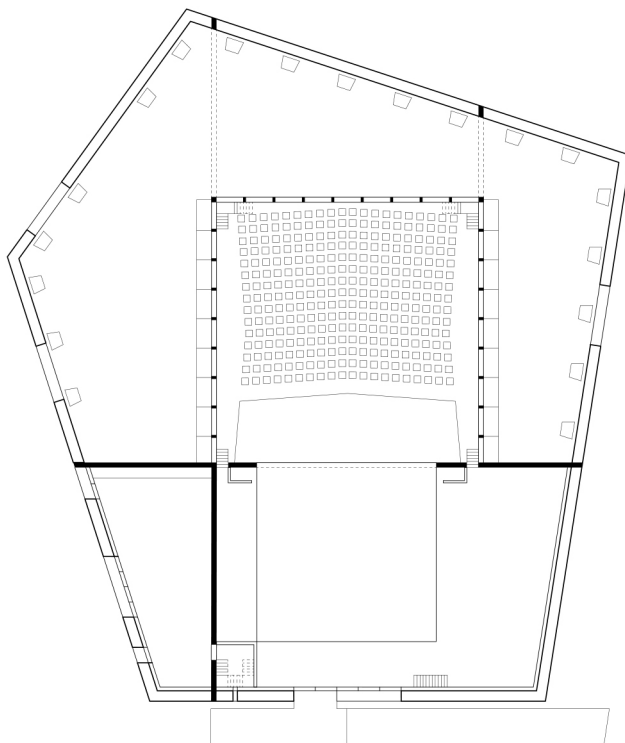


Visp Theater
1:250

arbitrariness and coarseness that bear no relation to the site”.¹ Although the project can be considered a privilege to speculate on what was never built, the accuracy and the close kinship with their further work prevents it to be reduced to a chimera. Moreover, the few documents available stress how the structural system was developed to allow an articulated whole by taking advantage of programmatic needs.

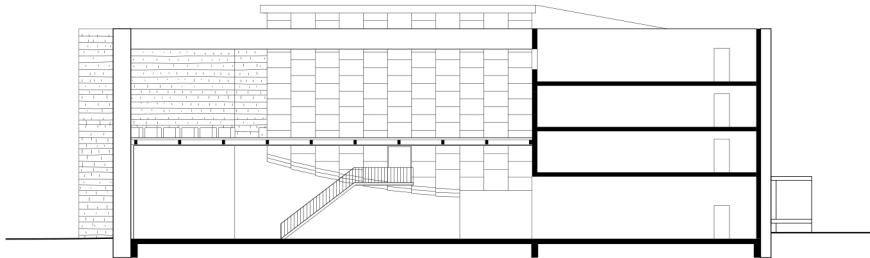
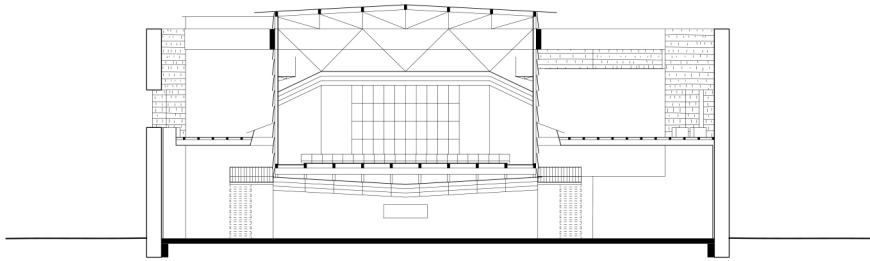
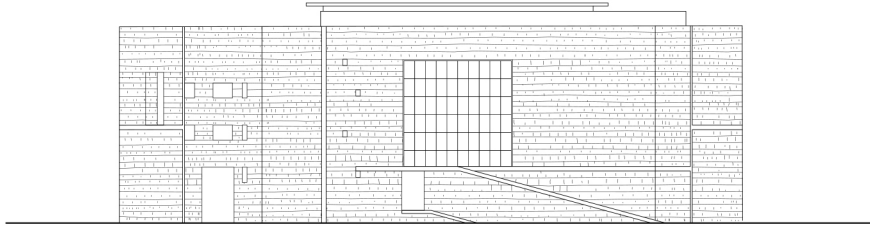
If the project uses the same dialectic of materials as the one developed in the Stone house, it turns out to be in fact much more rational, and ultimately radical, in the role assigned to each structural element. Indeed, in the case of the Stone House built in Tavole, the structure seems to undergo a series of operations to escape the logical relation between the skeleton and the infill. In accordance with the will to isolate the concrete skeleton as an independent element extending on the outside, the whole structure endures a certain treatment which complexifies the articulation between slabs, poles and beams. Reminiscent of Herzog & de Meuron’s ambiguous necessity to reduce all building components to equivalent tools, this gets even clearer in a detail drawing which was finally not realized in the house, where the square posts’ angles are recessed from the envelope’s surface in order to give the impression that the skeleton is not even involved in supporting the infill. On the contrary, and rather surprising for a competition stage, the Visp proposal investigates a very complex structure in the manner of Russian dolls; each part contributing to a supporting-supported system which articulates clearly the program. Thought as the building’s structural heart, a set of concrete veils are partly sunken in the ground, organizing the main scene and all the technical issues of the theater such as sets, dressing rooms and storage spaces. By doing so, it assures the rigidity of the whole and allows the monolithic system to extend on two

¹ Jehle-Schulte Strathaus, “Architektur ist Denken ausstellen”, 48. “Jeder Stein verweist hier auf die verlorengegangene Situation des Ortes, wo mit einer unverständlichen Beliebigkeit und Grobheit Quartiere hingestellt werden, die zum Ort und zu den traditionellen Architekturen des Ortes in keiner Beziehung stehen. In Visp wirkt diese Struktur wie ein Findling.”



flying beams towards the perimeter's wall where the loads are carried down by columns. Conceived as a wooden box, the auditorium is partly carried by this very part of the skeleton and by the addition of a technical strip on the ground floor; apparently free-standing, the box reveals to participate in carrying the flooring structure of the terrasse, which rests partly on the ground floor perimeter walls. Finally, the pentagonal shape of the stone envelope escapes the inner structure's orthogonal system, displaying punctually fragments of the concrete structure on the outside as a clear will to express the infill's autonomy in the whole narrative.

If in the house in Tavole the reason for the material is to be seen as an intensification of the landscape's original stone features, here the envelope's treatment adopts a stronger meaning.² In a will of *mimesis* the medieval village's stone work reappears on the building perimeter which extends to the entire plot's ground. It becomes the generator of an urban tapestry depicting the building not only as a boulder but as a broader environment to address the context's lack of urbanity. The pentagonal perimeter becomes thus a background figure responding differently with each sides of the context; it faces frontally the main street crossroads with a folded blind wall, recesses from the residential housings creating a pedestrian square which leads to a collective cafeteria, and addresses the street with a clear symmetrical entrance. If the diagrammatical act of inscribing a figure in another can barley be associated with Herzog & de Meuron's early work, the plan shows nevertheless a common attitude according to the four project series, but this time expanded to a bigger scale as a place to rethink and surpass the very nature of the program.



Far from their hometown, it may be a moment in which the attitude developed in their later projects finds retroactively its own manifesto. Inscribed as a precondition for an urban discourse, the inverted *boiserie* becomes the heart of a larger theorem where interiority is now treated as a condensed version of exteriority. The plan is articulated on one geometry in combination with another one; one figure is somehow working as a correction of the other one, duplicating the very act of exhibiting architecture. Because the project is so—a big communal house—Herzog & de Meuron emphasizes the program of the theater to an urban discourse by building a proper framework for experimentation. In fact, by standing as an emergence in the sequence of spaces, the blunt box is first seen as an ideogram hosting the very idea of the theater; a public understanding of a place staging culture, which then leads the spectators to the upper terrace. There, the box turns out to participate in a larger urban event made of various architectural fragments. Blunt and opaque on both floors, the box is somehow reminiscent of the more discreet Plywood house which is now turned inside out in the manner of the Party Wall. If the former encloses the spectator of a marionette play in a homogeneous stage framed by a plywood *boiserie*, the Visp terrace ultimately becomes an open elevated piazza able to absorb diverse programmatic needs.

Moreover, although the theatricality of the place seems contained by the perimeter, this very notion is perverted by the envelope and the nature of its openings. In fact, being only accessible from the box itself, the elevated piazza goes beyond the idea of overlooking the panorama and becomes a stage in itself from the outside world. Seemingly indebted by Rossi's Teatro del Mondo, the initial self-presenting architecture's autonomy now breaks up its own finitude from the inside-out: "The space of representation and the experience of participation have flattened themselves so that they can no longer

be distinguished.”³ The windows are thus to be looked through as fragments of an overflowing urban scene, just as the theatrical technique of *direct address* in which the actor breaks through the imaginary fourth wall of the stage to engage the audience directly in the world of the play. If the envelope’s thickness of the Apartment Building along a Party Wall displayed a scene to exhibit their architecture by engaging frontally the surroundings; and if the Ricola warehouse’s *mimesis* revealed its immediate context as part of a larger scene; here both of these conditions are brought together as an urban fact avid of theatrical reality. By ultimately denying the distinction between the historical center and suburbia, the theater exists through its civic understanding of culture as a part of a larger *mise-en-scène* where everything is yet possible.

3 Libeskind, “Deus Ex Machina, Machina Ex Deo”, 14.

discussion with Bruno Reichlin

My warmest thanks to Bruno Reichlin for giving me his time for this discussion.

FD: A large part of the bibliography on Swiss-German architecture published in the 1980's refers to semiotics. Recourse to this sort of transfer of concept shows a will to search for new tools to depict what was emerging in Switzerland. Can you explain this interest?

BR: At the end of my studies, I had the impression that I hadn't done anything at the Polytechnic. I'm exaggerating a little but one of the only teachers I still have fond memories of is Bernhard Hoesli, otherwise there weren't many of them. Later, when I already had my own office, I was working at the *gta* on Le Corbusier, and by that time I had already become very interested in semiotics in 1968 by following a lecture given by Giovanni Klaus Koenig, a specialist in twentieth-century German architecture and one of the Italian semioticians who came from the behaviorist movement.

FD: Did your interest in semiotics stem from a literary or linguistic interest, or was it already related to architecture as a new tool for describing it?

BR: Right from the start. When I say that I was a bit skeptical about teaching at the Polytechnic, it's because I was very interested in architectural criticism as a way of doing architecture, which wasn't at all the case at the polytechnic. This also happened in Italy. We began to realize that we were running out of tools. Naturally, there was a key figure in Italy: Bruno Zevi, whom I had read in Italian because he had not yet been translated. When I went to Florence on my scholarship, the students occupied the school for almost a year, ultimately there was no teaching. Umberto Eco had just written *La struttura assente* with a chapter on architecture, and I enrolled in a summer course in semiotics he was giving in Urbino. I naturally read almost everything he published. Eco was convinced that no one except an architect could link semiotics to architecture. I went to see him several times, and I also realized that everything was yet to be done in the semiotic approach. We

had to go through textual analysis, and that's why I started writing about it in my own way, which actually interested quite a few people.

FD: From the early 1980s onwards, Herzog & de Meuron's first projects seem to distance themselves from the rest of the Swiss production. I mean that the façade plays a role beyond the image, it really creates hierarchies in a desire to serve and make use of the direct context. Since the 1990s, however, this notion has tended to disappear, or to be reduced to the interest of the material alone, which constitutes an interesting field of experimentation, but nevertheless entails the loss of the former quality. From this point of view, one could say that something gets lost at some point, and I wonder how Aldo Rossi's teaching at ETH played a role in this aspect of their early projects?

BR: If Rossi came to Zurich it was because Fabio Reinhart and I brought him here, for no other reason. We manipulated the teachers to get him here.

FD: I know that in the context preceding the student movements of 1968, Lucius Burckhardt was already

director of the school. Architecture was then being swept up between various disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and the humanities, and Rossi arrived in 1972 as a visiting professor, while *The Architecture of the City* was translated into German the following year.

BR: Following the lack of teaching I was referring to before, Fabio Reinhart and I became assistants at ETH and we were asked to visit Rossi to see if he was interested in being interviewed to teach in Zurich. We had already organized an exhibition of his work at ETH in the autumn of 1971 or spring of 1972, where we invited him to give a talk. We translated his lecture and added things that were appropriate to say at ETH. I was then asked to do the translation for Rossi's interview with the Rectorate, who knew that he was a communist. In the end, it all went very well. Let's just say that the arrival of Aldo Rossi as a professor created a lot of attraction. What Herzog & de Meuron appreciated in Rossi was the person he was and his knowledge of architecture. This is reflected in their first project.

FD: The Blue House?

BR: Yes, it's a fundamentally liberating moment. Rossi dialogues with the great architecture of a city seen from a point of view that's not quite Loosian, but where Loos clearly plays a fundamental role: What Loos says and doesn't do, and what Loos does and doesn't say. Rossi wrote about Loos in Casabella when he was very young. I remember visiting the Blue House with Fabio Reinhart and Herzog et de Meuron. It wasn't bad, but it didn't really impress me that much. On the other hand, it was a good illustration of the fact that if you didn't want to go all Rossi, you needed a bit of Venturi.

FD: There's an implosion of references in this project.

BR: You have to realize that they're very impressionable. You have to look closely at their diploma work. In fact, they did it with Fabio and myself and a little Rossi. It was a good project and I still remember their concerns. With Rossi, we always referred to the great history of architecture and to questions of composition, architecture as a form of institution – *l'architettura sono le*

architetture – but they were looking for a form of accidentality. You have to look at the climate of this period, the influence of Hermann Czech and his rediscovery of Josef Frank's Accidentism. It was in the zeitgeist to explore the rules and disturb them. Rossi's architecture gave these questions a certain acuity, but if you look at the Photographic Studio Frei, there they really found each other. There, they didn't refer to what we considered to be architecture. What are the constraints of things? How can they be overturned? In short, a very dialectical way of asking questions. Our interest in memory has been replaced by personal memory, and that, at the same time, is very Swiss. Switzerland was constructed, let's say, by the intelligent deconstruction of others. They got out of the game to propose a new one.

I also remember talking to them about the Blue House when it was still just a drawing, and the influence of Alvar Aalto. Although he was no longer present in the school's teaching, he was still influential among architects where young graduates went to do their internships. Aalto was admired for his ability to draw and his interest in composition,

which was very different from Rossi. Unfortunately, nobody talks about him anymore.

FD: Precisely, this question of composition interests me insofar as in the Blue House as in the Photographic Studio Frei, we move from an implosion of fragments of images to another form but still composed of fragments (the gallery, a covered space, the studio) where the use of materials reacts to the direct context, the backyard, the front, etc. But the pure idea of the «box» doesn't really exist. If we take the example of the St Alban-Tal housing project (016) won in 1981 by Diener & Diener, it's interesting to note that Herzog & de Meuron adopts the same strategy as the winner. In fact, they use fragments of images reacting to each side of the site, whereas on the contrary, in smaller projects such as the Apartment Building along a Party Wall on Hebelstrasse, the strategy is quite different; the building is displayed as an autonomous object, a piece of furniture in a house. They even speak of a musical instrument. To that regard, the Visp theater proposal is a fascinating project. On the phone, you told me about the moment you walked into the jury room and Herzog & de Meuron's model caught your eye. So

you were sure it was a Herzog & de Meuron's project? Do you know what aspects made you think that?

BR: Indeed, you look at this facade... and let's say there's an element in common with a building they were doing.

FD: The stone house in Tavole...

BR: Yes. There's first of all the fact of creating an enclosure and putting something inside it, but also of accepting situations that are, how shall we say, decidedly informal. There are two things, one is the building in relation to the outside and the other the building in relation to the inside, but they must not be the same thing but two completely different things. So I wondered who in Switzerland could do this, and I thought they were the only ones who could do it in this way, although they hadn't yet really played this game between regularity and irregularity.

FD: Earlier, we discussed the role of the façade for Herzog & de Meuron, which, rather than

negotiating, clearly interacts frontally with the surroundings. One could say that the envelope acquires a certain thickness, physical and conceptual in a way. According to this, I would like to return to Rossi and the link that can exist between architecture and staging. In the Visp theater, there's something of the Teatro del Mundo. The program calls for a theater, but in the plan you can clearly see the idea of a journey: the stairs leading up to the half-cased box, which opens after the performance and leads out onto this large balcony terrace, which turns out to be more than that: you discover a square. It is very urban: a raised square that frames the sky and opens onto the landscape with occasional windows. It's all part of the theater's program, insofar as you become an actor-spectator surrounded by accumulation of architectures. In today's competitions, it sometimes happens that a large multi-purpose room is proposed to absorb the overflow of certain programs. In this sense, this project is still innovative, and I know that what punctured the project was the lack of respect for the surface areas requested by the program.

BR: I don't want to talk nonsense, but I even think that the mention they got was almost the same value

as the first-place prize. I know that I pushed very hard for this project because it was clearly the best of all, but for the reasons set out by the Canton's architect, namely the failure to respect the surface areas requested, I understand that they couldn't make it win, even though by the end he was convinced that it was an excellent project.

FD: Do you think it was the formal radicality of the project that perished it in the end?

BR: No, they had nothing against it at first. It's funny, I've asked myself this question before, but it's true that by the third selection round, I still hadn't heard any particular hostility. You'd have to imagine that the jury had to be on their best behavior. Snozzi was there and argued well. In the end, we didn't challenge the winner at all, because we felt that it was the one that really satisfied the program. The cantonal architect was all for the Herzog & de Meuron project right up to the end, but he was afraid that if that project won, we might not have another competition like it.

FD: In what sense?

BR: He was afraid of having a project win that didn't respect the rules of the competition, and we agreed together to make the decision. There was also the question of its German character, so far removed from the others, so you can imagine in Valais if the winning project didn't comply with the rules of the specifications, the profession risked making quite a fuss. The winning project wasn't from Valais either, but from Ticino, and it was compliant in the end...

FD: In *Architecture for Museums*, Rossi defines three fundamental points for his theory: the monuments, the discourse on form and the physical world, and the reading of the city, i.e. urban architecture (this third point developed in parallel in *The Architecture of the City*). In this respect, I'm curious about the publication on the vernacular of Ticino led by Rossi, for which you wrote the preface with Fabio Reinhart.

BR: Oh yes, that was our initiative. In 1972, there was a bank that had a cultural association, the Fondazione Ticino Nostro, two people on whose scientific board knew us very well: one was my high school history teacher, and they were interested in our work because we had some restoration projects underway in Ticino.

It was an important cultural heritage and nobody gave small loans to renovate these places and turn them into vacation homes anymore. It's a banker's reason, let's say. He offered to give us some money to do an exhibition on good uses of rural architecture, to promote its preservation.

FR: So there was a progressive dimension?

BR: Yes, there was a landscape that was disappearing, and that's a shame. There were areas that were really becoming depopulated. For example, we worked on a restoration project in a village with 80 inhabitants, and when we finally got the mandate, there were only 8 left. Later, things picked up again, with road improvements in particular. People realized that they could live outside Lugano or Locarno and take the car to work, or go there on weekends as a second home. That's where this initiative came from. The capital was trying to produce something clever where it looked like everyone was winning, and I think that wasn't so wrong after all.

And then they came up against our determination. Of course, before we could think of getting our hands on this heritage, we had to survey it to really get to know it. This meant carrying out typological and socio-cultural research, as well as legal and inheritance research, to understand the rationale behind this rural architecture. So we turned to Rossi, with whom we had started working at ETH and in parallel with the survey work in Zurich.

FD: In the same way that Rossi looked at architecture in the city to integrate a reasoning into the project, was there any common link with the study of the vernacular? Today we often see competitions in communes or villages that want to define a centrality, a community center, a cultural hub; in short, a shared form that represents a potential for architecture in which the idea of the city can be seen as diffused on a large-scale.

BR: Yes, of course. Basically, what's interesting is that we were transferring the same kind of observation we were making about the city of Zurich, for example, to these villages, and we were trying to understand what there was as a shared heritage. It's amazing to

see how, in these villages, the alliances of certain families are built up and deconstructed, but also the migrations. We continued his research, in Geneva and Ulm among other places, studying how the inhabitants saw the village, where it begins and ends, where the other begins. We had an extremely articulate view of this. We can go and see it in the library if you like.

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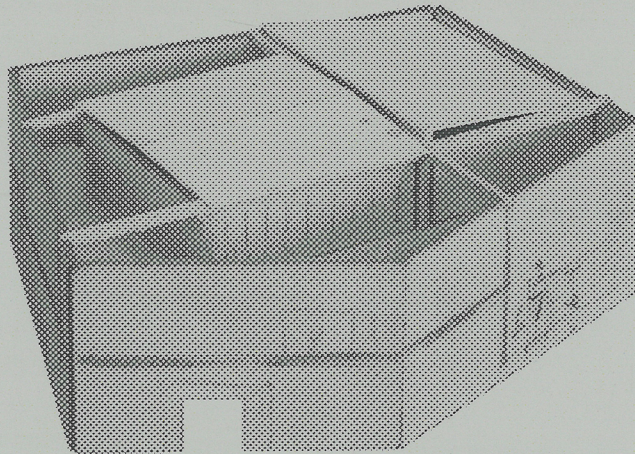
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Herzog & de Meuron, *Visp
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