WORK-WORLD: PART-COUNTERPART

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Introduction to Pezo von Ellrichshausen Monograph
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The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. Søren Kierkegaard, Repetition

Loos swept right beneath our feet, and it was a Homeric cleaning—precise, philosophical and logical. Le Corbusier, Frankfurter Zeitung.

*For love of the world* is the answer Hannah Arendt gave when asked why she had devoted her entire life to philosophy. So important was the theme that she first thought to use the Latin version of the phrase (amor mundi) as title of the text ultimately published as The Human Condition (1). Another evidence of her long-standing concern with the adventures of affection is the title and subject of her first book, *Love and Saint Augustine*. The true correlative of desire, she argued, is something lacking in one’s life, something wanted as a counterpart. A sense limitation is required for this experience—being at an edge or boundary—and beyond it, some image of richness or abundance. In architecture an analogous relationship exists between the needs of the work and the resources of the world, played out at the building’s borders, through elements that enclose and open the interiors, constructed of course, and defined geometrically. Were we to ask Pezo von Ellrichshausen why their buildings are defined so substantially, precisely, and resolutely, I suspect the answer would be some equivalent to Arendt’s for love of the world.

The geometries used by Pezo von Ellrichshausen seem simple, disarmingly so. In a time when formal experimentation often seeks novelty above all else, the plans and sections of these buildings appear out of season, at least initially. Yet, if a desire for something spectacular doesn’t prevent one from looking more closely,
the designs reveal exceptional refinement, elegance, and inventiveness. Here is an opening question: how can inventiveness occur when plans deploy familiar forms? The square appears in many of these buildings, variously resized or adjusted proportionally, by doubling, adding or subtracting a half or the length of the diagonal—nothing new in that. Likewise axial symmetry, seen so often in this work, is an unfashionable but well-known instrument of plan arrangement; although the lines of composition in these plans generally do not structure spatial passage, the main rooms of the Cien House and the mid-plan stairway of Arco House being exceptions. And finally, the nesting of smaller spaces within proportionate subdivisions of the primary forms is an equally recognizable motif of compartition—Alberti, whose term I’m using, argued for this centuries ago. Assuming that the reuse of familiar techniques is not an end in itself, two explanations suggest themselves: either Pezo von Ellrichshausen intend their geometries to be representational in some way, or they are mechanisms of design technique. Nuanced differentiation shows that there is nothing mechanical about these arrangements. If one says they are representational it is because they anticipate and trace patterns of inhabitation, proportioning, one can say, the ratio between what the work lacks and the world supplies.

The imitation of praxis (mimesis tes praxeos) is the principle that governs plot composition, according to Aristotle’s Poetics (2). Accepting this premise, the forms arranged by Pezo von Ellrichshausen define enclosures not geometries, settings prepared to accommodate typical patterns of living. Lines of symmetry, for example, are lines of sight or movement. Nested forms cluster co-dependent purposes: cupboards buttressing work spaces, for example, or closets in support of bedrooms. When geometries are disciplined in these ways everyday life unfolds freely. Instead of requiring attention, the forms adopt a reticent stance, rather like a silent witness attending to some unselfconscious act of generosity. Quiet but ready, provisionings of this kind expect to be consulted only when the practices of dining, sleeping, conversing, or working need a little support—limiting their involvement to the anticipations and tracings I mentioned earlier. Support such as this seems effortless. What is more, these configurations show impressive economy. I do not mean the tight-fisted, sparing sort, but the elegance that results from a sharing of spaces that hold common interest. There are a very few corridors in the plans of these buildings; typically patios or entry halls combine and condense circulation
requirements. Likewise, storage and service spaces are normally packed into wall thicknesses, making the space of the room as generous as possible. And the furniture that is not free-standing and centrally located is also admitted into wall depth (seating alcoves, benches, etc.), so that the movements of residing have the fewest constraints, as in the Abba, Gago, and Solo Houses, for example. One suspects that economies such as these resulted from painstaking studies of intervals and alignments, worked and reworked until their number and variations were reduced to fullness. But my main point is that the labor of design is not in service of pleasing geometry—certainly not that alone, even though it is pleasing—but the performances and practices the forms accommodate and represent.

The part-to-counterpart relationship one sees in the plans of these projects is also apparent in their sections and elevations—but with a difference. What the program is to the plan, topography is to the section and elevation. With the word topography I mean land of course (terrain), together with its less weighty other half (climate, atmosphere, densities, and distances), but also the cultural aspects of a place (settlement patterns, histories, and characters). Obviously, content as rich as this exceeds what any single building can supply. Once architecture’s essential poverty is observed, elements such as apertures become instruments of longing (3).

Many, though not all of the sites Pezo von Ellrichshausen have been given are sloped. In response, their projects adopt either of two siting strategies: rising above the fall of the terrain or cutting into it. The first strategy can be seen in the Sota, Abba, Guna, and Solo houses, for example, and the second in Gago, Faro, Arco, Cien, Fosc, and Poli. Both approaches lead to the multiplication of platforms, below, within, and above the building’s basic volume. Another way to think of this is to view the building as a very big stairway with each of its platforms (inside or out) serving the function of a landing, connected to others and the wider milieu by a few intermediate steps, so that the building-stairway continues the approach and extends the departure. Pezo von Ellrichshausen have suggested as much in a comment they offered about the Cien House: “decisive coincidences such as the number of steps on a hill path nearby, an old cypress, or even the elevation above sea level that defines [the] podium can explain this building’s silhouette.” (4) Well, at least partly. The stairway sense of the section, its continuity within and outside the building’s proper limits, allows the work involvement with dimensions of the ambient surround that are not properly its own.
Something very similar happens with the apertures of these houses. Perhaps the most vivid case is the Poli House. Here the part-to-counterpart relationship unfolds by means of simply-shaped and sharply-cut openings in the building's massive perimeter walls. It is hardly surprising to find walls as bulky as these in a landscape that suffers earthquakes with discouraging frequency. Yet, when inside this house, resistance to the wider landscape seems to have been the last thing the architects had on their minds, for the perforations in the perimeter welcome the site's light, air, and sound so openly that the work seems best described as a receptacle, an open hand to all the world has to offer. The notion that the inside and outside should be connected is, of course, a commonplace of modern architecture. But seeing the openings here as instruments of "flow" means overlooking these very hard edges, also their sharpness and substantial back up, so impassively resolute and committed to resistance. The work opens itself to the world because all of its energies are concentrated on maintaining its own definition, not making any claims on what is not its own. Outward reach has not been accomplished because it was never attempted. Instead, the building is willing to wait—again like a silent witness—confident that the qualities of the world that will enrich its unpolished surfaces will make their appearance when they choose, according to their own schedule, with a force and direction they decide, according to the building's expectations sometimes, often not, but always giving rhythm and amplitude to life within its walls. Even though it argues for receptivity, the house does not adopt the restrictions that architecture called minimalist imposes on itself. Posited instead—through the procedures of construction craft as much as design and specification—are spaces and surfaces that resist what cannot be suffered and allow what will be enjoyed.

Rainer Maria Rilke defined love as an agreement that protects and nurtures individualities. It is, he said, just the opposite of a "quick commonality" that results from tearing down all boundaries. As if he were writing about concepts of connection that are common in architecture, Rilke argued that "merging" is in fact impossible, when approximated it results in a "hemming in," a denial of freedom. Differences and distances always exist. Far from being a problem they allow for the emergence of a "marvelous side-by-side living." (5) The transactions between the work and the world instituted by the buildings of Pezo von Ellrichshausen advance
the same thesis I think: caring for our lives and the environment by quietly and confidently staging their ever-changing interplay.

Notes

2 Aristotle, Poetics 1448a; for elaboration and commentary, see Ernesto Grassi, Die Theorie des Schönen in der Antike (Köln: Dumont, 1980) 125.

3 Kyra Stromberg has used an equivalent phrase, the window as a “place of longing” (der Sehnsuchtsort Fenster), in “The Window in the Picture—The Picture in the Window,” Daidalos 13 (Berlin, 15 September, 1984) 59.


5 Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, Letter 7 (New York: Norton, 1934) 52ff.