



1. View of the *Fin d'Ou T Hou S* model and exhibition installation in the AA Exhibition Gallery.

1985

Not To Be Used for Wrapping Purposes

A Review of the Exhibition of Peter Eisenman's *Fin d'Ou T Hou S* 119
Shown at the Architectural Association, London

I have had trouble coming to terms with writing about Eisenman's work (Fig. 1). The particular work under review, a series of models and drawings of a four-stage transformation performed on a cube house, is more characteristic than it is significant. It hardly breaks new ground, but that is not itself the difficulty. The difficulty is writing. Here am I, writing about a work that claims for itself the status of writing, that tells us it cannot be detached from the writing that accompanies it (essays by Nina Hofer and Jeffrey Kipnis) and which, in so far as it is the work of Peter Eisenman, is protected by a great volume of writing by himself and others. Much of the writing by others has been highly critical in tone, it is true, yet this does not seem to matter half so much as the transferring into most of it of the same little zoo of terminologies and examples with which Eisenman populates his own architectural writing. More like a process of bacterial infection than critical discussion.

In these circumstances opposition becomes just another species of affirmation, adding further to the great volume of writing. How then to escape this ingeniously set trap of unwilling complicity? There is a strong temptation to bring it all down to a gesture. In the middle of a recent lecture at the RIBA, while Eisenman was discoursing on the absence of presence and the presence of absence, a member of the audience, thinking it time to leave, stepped in front of the projector, his expanded shadow eclipsing the image of the slide for a few well-chosen moments, thus illustrating the absence of presence and the presence of absence in wonderfully concrete terms. Since it was made without words or writing it could be proposed as the most telling critique to date. The rest of the audience certainly rated it thus, though more for its explicitness than its intellectual content.

But maybe he does not deserve this kind of treatment either. Of that well-established generation of well-known East Coast American architects perhaps only he and Hejduk do not merit the dismissive gesture. Both nevertheless open themselves up to it, in

similar ways: Hejduk with his unutterable poetry; Eisenman with his indigestible prose. What I would like to look into here is the role of writing, how it operates as a model for Eisenman's architecture, and how the printed word, while seeming to provide an entrance to the hermetic objects he creates, works in quite the reverse direction: it is the words that make the objects they describe hermetic.

Eisenman has published a number of full-scale essays over the past two decades. He is literate and knowledgeable. Though some of his essays are tied to his own projects, others are apparently independent items, such as those on Terragni, 'The Futility of Objects' and 'The End of the Classical'. All without exception involve the construction and maintenance of positions, the determining of a stance. They are expository and didactic, so that, although questions may be raised, and although they are peppered with expressed doubts, these doubts and questions are themselves tectonic elements of the construction. There is nothing questionable or doubtful about them since they are marshalled in relation to an advocacy that tells us what the architectural work is, what it is about and what it is like. 'The Futility of Objects' for example starts, like a manifesto, with the declaration that 'a new sensibility exists', and then describes the characteristic expressions of the new sensibility, which turn out to be exactly those he currently attributes to his own work. Pursuing a completely independent line of inquiry, he arrives at an identical set of conclusions – an old forensic trick. Still, this is the way that architects write: defensively, offensively, as if the words were part of some covert military campaign simultaneously to promote conquest and to protect the homeland. It is just that Eisenman's writing is more extensive, concerted and insistent than usual, his only real competitor in this respect being Venturi.

If Eisenman says his architecture is writing, I would say his writing is an armoured vehicle. What is it protecting? His architecture? This would be the functional explanation. Somewhere

inside the wrapping, under cover and difficult of access, is the work. Functional explanations tend to produce a compelling if largely fatuous self-evidence: the aim of architectural writing by architects would thus be to protect the work, the aim of architectural writing by critics to expose it. This formula represents a limited, local truth. Like all functional explanations it presumes too much and recognizes too little. It is certainly ungenerous. All the same, protective, evasive strategies abound in Eisenman's writing. The reiteration of recondite, technical terms that suck meaning out of any sentence. The claim of support from higher authority (mathematics, linguistics, philosophy). And more recently the resort to deceptions against audiences and readers which will make it increasingly difficult for critics to catch his tail: the smokescreen, the bluff, the dodge.

Protection works both ways. Zoo officials like to point out that their antiquated cages and barred compounds have to be preserved to protect the animals as well as the public. Eisenman's writing also, while protecting his projects from the audience, more or less inadvertently protects the audience from his projects. In particular it casts a veil over their static, obdurate, uncommunicative qualities.

To claim, in the footsteps of Jacques Derrida, that architecture is a kind of writing, is not itself notable after twenty years of insistence on the language model. It is the way the claim is used that merits attention. In all innocence, one might expect that architecture, under the influence of such a claim, would become more expressive, though not in the sense that, say, Scharoun's or Gaudi's buildings are said to be expressive. Their kind of expressive architecture depends on an excess of formal activity, an excessive shapeliness in comparison with other architecture. This kind of expressiveness, dependent on the increased physical presence of the work, is familiar to us. The expressiveness of architecture modelled on writing might, on the other hand, arise out of the *decreased* physi-

cal presence of the work. Thus it would borrow the most astounding characteristic of writing: the ability to bring into being a world *outside* of itself in terms of a restricted set of relations entirely within itself. With writing, enormous sense can be made with a few scratches. A property far more pronounced in writing than in speech is that of being able to conjure up an almost corporeal vividness of impression with a system of conventionalized marks. These impressions are accentuated in such a way as to be quite different from those of seeing, hearing and touching unabetted by language. It is not just that writing means something (a condition difficult to avoid), but that it means so very much, being so very little.

The structuralists, aware of this striking quantitative ratio, concentrated on underlying formations. And certainly it could be argued that their choice was not only justified on theoretical grounds but, in emphasizing abstraction, helped throw contrasting features into higher relief. For, as language lost its basis in natural origins, and as its physical elements – sounds and letters – were recognized to be as good as arbitrary, its evocative power could only appear more miraculous, not less. How else to account for the attractiveness of structuralism to figures such as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes?

The simultaneous presence of manifest sense and abstraction, the excessive and the minimal, was implicit in the structuralist account of language, but it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the subject of study would be erroneously identified with the reason for studying it. That is to say, there would come a time when, because structure had been dwelt on for so long, a structure would be assumed to contain all the properties of language if it exhibited a system of relations something like that of language. At which stage of development structuralism could be said to have consumed its own source of inspiration. The condition is nicely summarized by Norman Bryson, who characterizes the resulting species of formalism as a 'disposition to treat *structure* as though it were information, and to regard what may be only a feature

permitting communication as communication already'. Such desiccation could not easily occur within literature, no matter how persistent the theory encouraging it. It is much more likely, however, once the linguistic model is exported to other allegedly language-like activities, for example the visual and performing arts and architecture. Surely there is evidence of this kind of formalism in *Fin d'Ou THou S*, as in so much of Eisenman's work. Behind it lies the presumption that, structure being essence, the structure must be iridescent with potential meaning. But what if it were not? What if instead, after this process of divestment – undressing the architectural object of its customary associations, stripping it down until it is as nearly as possible a formation from which ordinary iconographic analysis could yield nothing – the effect were not one of iridescence but of muteness? Is this not the problem that Eisenman faces? The nature of the problem helps explain the way in which writing is used to the disadvantage of the projects by Eisenman himself. What I shall try to show is that the problem as formulated may well be an illusion fostered by the very means he employs to shield us from this embarrassing knowledge. A great deal hinges on the forlorn hope. If the prospect was to reveal the interior iridescence that belongs to the conceptual structure and it failed to appear, one might be tempted to behave as if it had, and then, eventually, to say that all along one knew there was nothing there.

Something must be said of the way the structuralist account of language is brought to bear on Eisenman's work, in particular of the formalist tendency, noted above, to identify structure with meaning. For it brings out an interesting peculiarity in the use of the language model. Having seen that language involves the paradoxical, wondrous combination of the minimal and the excessive (elliptic form, hyperbolic sense) and thinking that this could also be the case in architecture, Eisenman spends about fifteen years working on an architecture from which everything superficial, circumstantial, practical and obvious has been evacuated. Right from

the beginning it is the model of language that he holds up as his paradigm, though at first it is Chomsky's *Transformational Grammar*, not Derrida's *Writing*. The change from one to the other, which took place around 1980, is disconcerting because it had no noticeable effect on the work. And inasmuch as either of the models accounts for the work the former still seems more a presence than the latter (whether their role need be restricted to accounting for the work is a question to which I shall return).

But there was a prospect in structuralism too, a hope that by studying one side of language its formal structure, deep or otherwise – one was in any case studying its other aspect, which is the enormous sense that we can make of it. Nothing could better illustrate this hope than Saussure's likening of language to a sheet of paper. The sheet has two sides, on one side sounds, on the other thought: recto and verso, different but impossible to detach from one another. So, if one side is studied, the other is too. Thought travels along in a wrapping of sound, yet the sounds are nothing other than a vehicle for abstract relations.

Eisenman's hope piled on top of Saussure's hope produces something very odd. Saussure saw language to be a combination of two very different things which linguistics would show to be bonded together. One of these things is studied in the hope that it will contain or illuminate the other: the study of structure will illuminate meaning. And the same hope is certainly present in the work of Eisenman's linguist mentor of the 1960s, Noam Chomsky. Eisenman sees that language is the subject under consideration, and sees also that language displays some characteristics similar to those found in architecture... Now what? This is where the ground shifts. The final phrases in the sequence are impossible to complete without an excursus. There is some confusion here about whether architecture is being made like language or studied like language. Suppose that it could at least be studied in the same way that the structuralists studied language. Then one would immediately be

confronted with the task of searching for the regions of resemblance. There are, after all, some obvious differences. For example, the enormous physical stature of architectural constructions compared to the ephemeral nature of words and the minimal physical presence of writing. St Paul's is much bigger than the collected works of John Donne, but it is easier to conceive the shape of St Paul's, etc. So the identity would have to be worked for and qualified, not just taken for granted. But this is not really Eisenman's problem. Much as he cultivates the idea of his own ambivalent status as writer-designer, a theorist whose architecture is in close dialogue with his writings, he remains an architect who uses his writings to establish the credibility of his work. Sure enough, the writings throw off plenty of captivating ideas, but this, let us assume for the moment, on the evidence of what they most obviously *are* doing, is incidental to their key role as bodyguards of the projects. So what does Eisenman the architect do? He takes note of the way in which language is being *studied* and attempts to incorporate in his architecture properties derived from the *study of language* in the era of structuralism, not properties derived from language itself. The difference is considerable. Language, written or spoken, is replete with manifest sense; the structuralist account of language is emptied of it. An architecture modelled on structuralism, empty therefore of manifest sense, would not be like language at all.

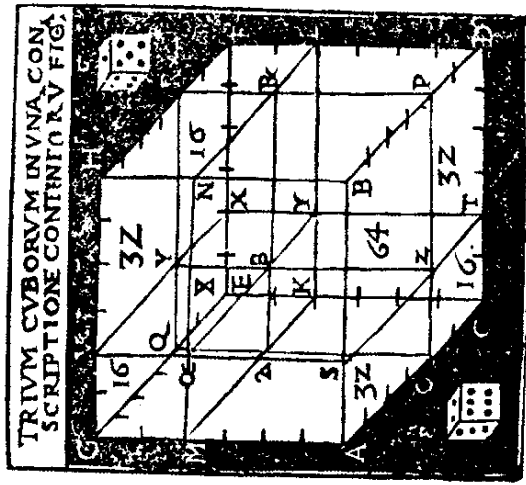
Indeed, an architecture thus constructed would probably not be very much like what we normally understand as architecture either. And that is one reason why Eisenman's work should not be dismissed. It does something really very interesting, but it does not do what he says it does. The linguistic study of language is analytical, and it is in the nature of analytic study, as with the dissection of rabbits, to pull things apart, to detach things wilfully from their circumstances to see what difference it makes. Taking an old-fashioned watch apart to learn how watches are made is not an

unreasonable activity. But determining the motions of the clockwork and then reproducing these in concrete is not reasonable if you want either to tell the time or to represent it. Eisenman puts himself in the invidious position of claiming to represent the nature of time when he is modelling the motions of the watch (in an extempore sort of way).

His architecture is not like language, it is more like the study of language. Likewise it is not writing (though here one would have to say that, in so far as it is Derrida's conception of writing that is referred to, it is not really like the study of writing either; it is still like the study of language in the era of structuralism; the original motives still retain their power over what he does). This might be applied to more than Eisenman and his work. Often the way something is studied is easier to assimilate than the properties of the thing itself; why then should not the mode of study be cycled into the making of things as well — turning the world gradually into a representation of our perception of it? I would perhaps have liked to end on this note, but that would be somewhat premature. A certain wariness about my own procedure is in order here, since I have become so critical of other peoples'. I should point out that what I have said so far is entirely the result of Eisenman's claim that his work is writing. Because he says it is, I say it is not, trying to explain the difference. In responding thus I have said next to nothing about the models and drawings. When I have alluded to them it has been as evidence against a conceit. This happens time and again to Eisenman. Critics, hacking their way through the thickness of words, finally arrive in a state of exhaustion before the object, at which point the episode is usually brought to a close. This is what I mean by the protective use of writing. It is unnecessary because the projects are often much more interesting than their justification, and it is counter-productive because it defines axes of discussion at best tangential to the work, or simply prevents access altogether — hence the accusation of hermeticism.

It is not in itself a problem that the projects are modelled on structuralism, not on language (speaking or writing). Their dumb insolence also may be more suggestive than problematic, for one is forced to look, not to listen, as it were. The problem is that Eisenman, like a puppeteer trying to convince the audience that his marionettes speak, when a dumb show is perfectly in order, spends too much time and effort maintaining unnecessary illusions. If one of these illusions is that his architecture is like language, the other is that it moves. Maybe I should have searched for a less aggressive critical simile, for the illusion of movement is, under the circumstances, neither unnecessary nor uninteresting.

At first it seems to be the writing that simulates the illusion of movement by a kind of ventriloquism, speaking for the architect, though in fact the source is not so easily determined. One instance of this will serve as an illustration. Over the years Eisenman has made use of a number of mathematical terms to describe the formal properties of his projects. Without benefit of these it might seem that not only the House series but also the more recent, more eclectic works at Berlin and Kent State and for the Milan Biennale are subsumed by three-dimensional grids made more or less visible. All the House projects are generated from cubes, subdivided, cut and shifted in various ways. Here we have two of the most essentially changeless architectonic forms brought together in a manner that accentuates their immobility. The indefinite extension of the grid contained within the cube, gestures to the infinite trimmed and fitted in boxes (Fig. 2). But this combination of sameness and stability is activated by a procedure of successive development called transformation by Eisenman. This term has since become so well established in the international architectural vocabulary that a conscious effort has to be made to see how the sense of the word insinuates movement into the procedure to which it is applied. Not just any old movement but a particular kind of movement. Eisenman first used the word with



2. The cube subdivided, by Cesare Cesariano, from his 1521 translation of Vitruvius.

reference to Chomsky's transformational grammar. The Transformational Component in Chomsky's linguistics provided the bridge between what he saw as the hidden Deep Structures of language and the Surface Structures of sentences. Eisenman saw his own procedure which generally commenced with a single alteration to a cube, ending up with something more complex and diverse - as analogous to Chomsky's Transformational Component. Chomsky in turn had borrowed the term from mathematics.

According to either the linguistic or the mathematical usage, a transformation is a systematic alteration of form, simultaneous and pervasive. However, the totality and the suddenness are in the history of the term, not in the procedure to which Eisenman applies it, which is piecemeal, partial, cumulative, elaborative, and is guided not by the mapping of one general system into another, as in mathematics and by implication in linguistics, but by a compositional sensibility not unfamiliar in the arts. The procedure looks

systematic and mathematically rigorous because the drawings are presented in such a way as to give that impression. Knowingly, Eisenman drops in the occasional disclaimer, telling us they are not really so methodical.

However dubious its name, the transformation technique as exemplified in the House series has been practised with consummate skill, each house carrying along with it a graphic pedigree indicating the origin and progress of its own development, or – with a blink of the eyes – presenting a set of denied projects whose full existence had been suppressed in favour of the one chosen, but which maintain a ghostly presence in the body of the host. Still, the products of this technique might better be called states than transformations, after the engraver's practice of printing a plate in various stages as the image is worked, reworked, erased and built up again. There is less movement in a state than in a transformation, and what movement it does bring with it is circumstantial, Brownian almost.

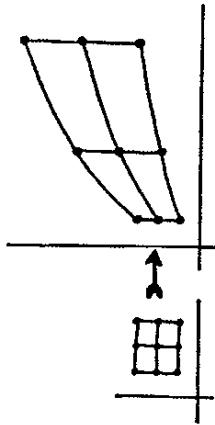
In the description of House XIa (1980) Eisenman introduces topological geometry. Topology is the mathematical study of non-metric surfaces and spaces, that is, the investigation of pliable forms within which measured distances are of no account. He knows this and indicates as much, yet the project is composed of the familiar metric elements in the familiar orthogonal format.

More recently still, with the Romeo and Juliet project for Vicenza, his mind has turned to fractals, which are of interest because, in a purely mathematical sense, they define procedures that seem to exist somewhere between whole-number dimensionality. So, mathematically speaking, there could be said to be some kind of space between two dimensions and three. Yet the shifted grids and dislocations of this project do not immediately bring to mind anything so paradoxical.

The blind totality of the transformation; the plasticity of the topological surface; the inconceivable in-betweenish dimension-

ality of the fractal, if brought directly into play, would threaten the most stable and fundamental features of architecture as it is now practised. Rectilinearity, measurement, space might all stretch or collapse beyond recognition under their pressure, or they might behave thus if Eisenman's gang of mathematical disruptors were allowed to affect anything drastically. But no – they appear to have been kept in check. To such an extent have they been kept in check that it is, at first, hard to identify even faint traces of their influence, or to discern their metaphorical shadows in his compositions of rectilinear frameworks and rectangular planes whose articulations are determined by whole-number subdivisions (characteristics which, though they may be traced back to mathematics, have long since been naturalized within architecture), and which for the most part remain undisturbed and undeformed.

If these foreign mathematical terms had been allowed to invade the work they would almost certainly have destroyed its quintessential architectural properties. They may just possibly have replaced them eventually. The question is not within the range of customary intuition to decide – that is part of the fascination in contemplating it – but, given the laws of entropy and chance, the greater likelihood would be their permanent corruption and obliteration. A dangerous business. Eisenman is in fact a jealous guardian of the stable and fundamental features of architecture. He is radical in his fundamentalism, not in challenging fundamentals (though his writing constantly strains to suggest the latter). Yet there was one remarkable exception. At the final stage of the development of House X, after the eighth proposal and after the client had decided not to go ahead and build, even though working drawings had been completed, so the story goes, a model was made. It was not a model of the house as it would have been built, however, but a model which was partially collapsed, all the uprights leaning forty-five degrees in the same direction. So, although a full-bodied model, it borrowed some of the character of an axono-



3. A transformation:
 $F(x, y) = (x', xy)$, by Ian Stewart.

4. Corinthian capitals, from Joan Caramuel Lobkowitz's *Architectura Recta y Obliqua*, 1678.

metric projection, and appeared to be in a state between drawing (just push a little further) and four-square, three-dimensional architecture: an intermediate condition. It is also the only true transformation, in the mathematical sense of the word, that he has ever performed on his work. He does not call it a transformation, though, for the series of what he calls transformations for House X had already been produced. Unlike these, the axonometric model was a thoroughgoing, unified distortion of a complete and finalized House design, and this is why the story about its being made after the project was finished is of more than incidental interest.

A true transformation of this kind is not exactly design because whatever is subject to the transformation must already be complete in all its parts. In a transformation only *relations* alter. No new elements can be introduced or removed; bits cannot be added or taken away; nothing can be elaborated. The difference is easy to see. In this instance the correspondence to mathematical transformation is such that a simple formula describes it (Fig. 3). For

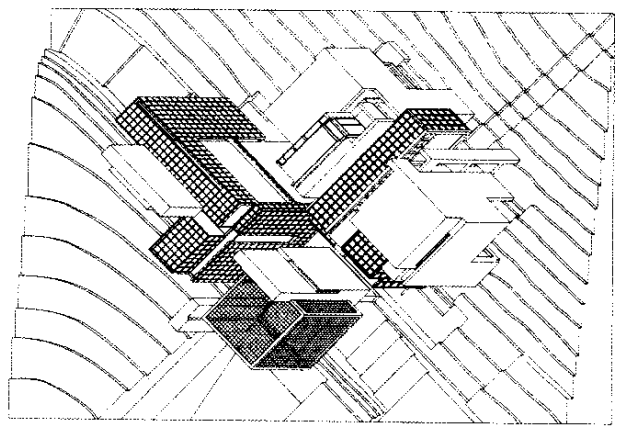
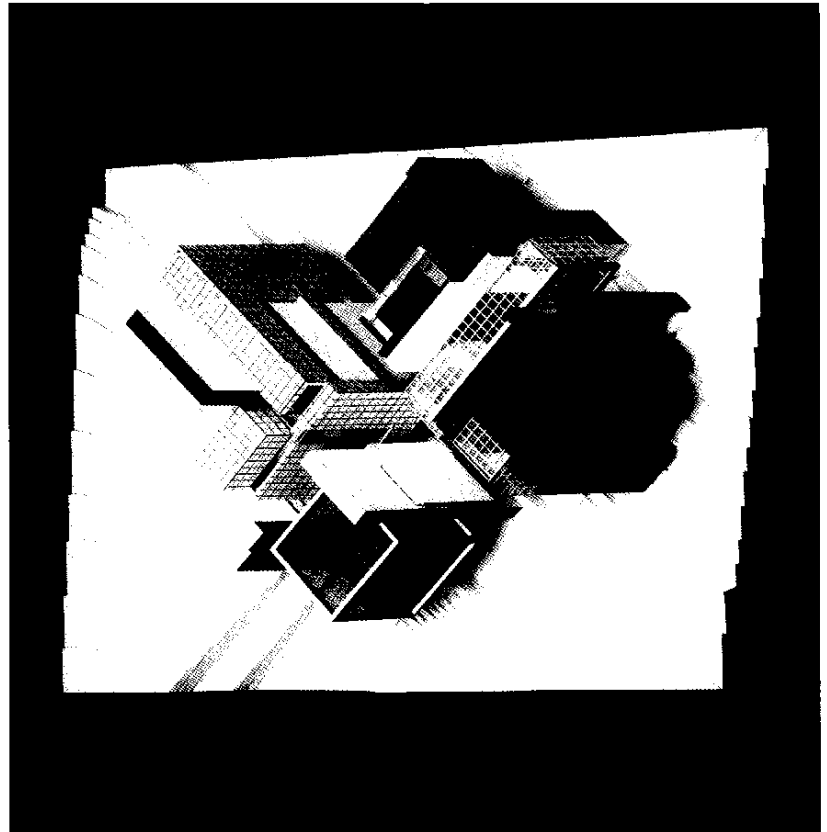


an oblique collapse like that of the House X model it is:

$$F(x, y, z) = (x + y/2, y/\sqrt{2}, [z + y/2]).$$

Precedents can be pointed to from within architecture, or perhaps it would be fairer to say from the periphery of architecture, none so close as Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz's *Architectura Recta y Obliqua* of 1678 (Fig. 4), in which the classical elements were subjected to similar transformation so as to fit them on to inclined staircase walls yet maintain continuity of line. Acknowledging the similarity enables us to recognize also the much greater sophistication and scope of Eisenman's axonometric model. Caramuel's oblique architecture, however interesting, was conceived as a way of coping with special cases, or of 'correcting' perceptual distortions. Its applications were localized and subordinate, whereas the axonometric model for House X plays more effectively within the gap between technique and the thing to which the technique is applied. The drawing and its object (the architecture) are quite distinct in Caramuel, and the transformation into the oblique is an

5. Below and right:
House X, Bloomfield
Hills, Michigan, 1975. 8.
Model and axonometric
drawing of scheme H.



entirely two-dimensional affair. In House X, drawing and object are more nearly conflated and the transformation operates in three dimensions (fig. 5). I do not know why Eisenman did not call it a transformation. It does not matter that he did not, as, formally speaking, a rose by any other name will retain identical relationships to all other elements in the semantic field. Nevertheless, given the theme of this article, his not doing so affords a small insight, suggestive rather than conclusive though it may be, into the less easily demonstrable value of his writing.

Irritated by his tactical deployment of the fashionable concept *Writing*, busy decrying the deplorable function of the writing itself in providing obscurity, being all too clear about its detrimental effects, it would be easy to overlook the positive contribution contained therein, mainly because the contribution does not come from the writing itself at all; it comes from the zoo inside the writing. The axonometric model provides an instance where it has been possible to identify a specific similarity between what

Eisenman says he makes and what he makes, and it is symptomatic that the similarity was unremarked by him. The polygenetic profusion of foreign thoughts, terminologies and subjects surrounding his architecture in his writing may have been contracted for mercenary purposes. Their principal task, once *in situ*, is, as I have insisted, to protect and corroborate the work by fair means or foul. Yet what is it, one may ask, that makes Eisenman recruit so enthusiastically over such a wide area? Another ungenerous thought presents itself, but it is not satisfactory; explanations that everyone can sagely nod at rarely are. One can see that he is far more attentive to the creatures in his zoo than would be necessary if all he wanted was to create an impression with them.

We have been talking about the writing. We are now talking of the thoughts caged up in it. Thoughts, though, are not always that easily penned. Often they give their keepers the slip, and once they have escaped they can lead a freer existence. They do not have to support anything, be responsible for anything, and they do not necessarily leave a deep impression on the things they touch. In this liberated but relatively powerless condition they flit in and around Eisenman's normally impregnable architecture.

In such circumstances the truthful conversion of thoughts into objects is not at issue. It really does not matter whether rumination on topology produces architectural forms that could properly be described only with the aid of topological geometry, as would happen if, for instance, topological invariance were to replace metric invariance or buildings were to be made with Möbius strips, Klein bottles and projective planes, rather than rods and plates, thoughts that would understandably frighten rather than inspire most architects. It might only be that topology is the initiator of a train of thought that leads towards architecture, and as such provides the stimulus for the doing of something that would not otherwise be done. By the time it makes its mark on architecture this 'something' need not have anything directly to do with topology, or

might involve only some marginal or insignificant aspect of it yet still be worthwhile.

If in House X the largely spurious assignment of labels such as topological axis of symmetry, topological transformation and Möbius strip were overlooked, it would be possible to look instead for the manner in which a train of thought passing through topology might have played upon the object. When, in one of the numerous explanatory models, Eisenman shows the pulling of a smaller cube through a larger one as if from a distendable mass, it could be said to resemble the differential topologist's procedure of pulling surfaces through each other. It resembles it without being the same. If the explanation were all that mattered, one might just as well say that it is like a sock being turned inside out, as say it is like a partial eversion of a closed surface, thus claiming patronage of modern mathematics. The diagrams that accompany the model to illustrate, step by step, the pulling of *a* through *b*, because they are presented as serious legitimization, are a parody of rigour. The model *can* nevertheless look as if such an unlikely operation has been performed on it without anything of the kind having taken place. Indeed, to imagine that it has requires the suspension of disbelief thrice over. The nature of the material of which the thing is made is inimical to it, so that the orthogonal crystalline cubic forms have to be thought of as having passed through a suitably soft, igneous phase. The passage of time within which the contortion took place has also to be wilfully imagined. In order to infer that a smaller cube has been pulled through a larger one, while itself being part of the larger one, the actual physical properties of the model -- spatial, temporal, material -- have to be mentally dissolved and reconstituted. A time has to be imagined in which the static is dynamic and the rigid pliable. Thoughts like this form a special class of imaginative fictions, since they are utterly implausible. If one might say of stories that they must sound as if they could be true, one might say of the commonplace fiction of

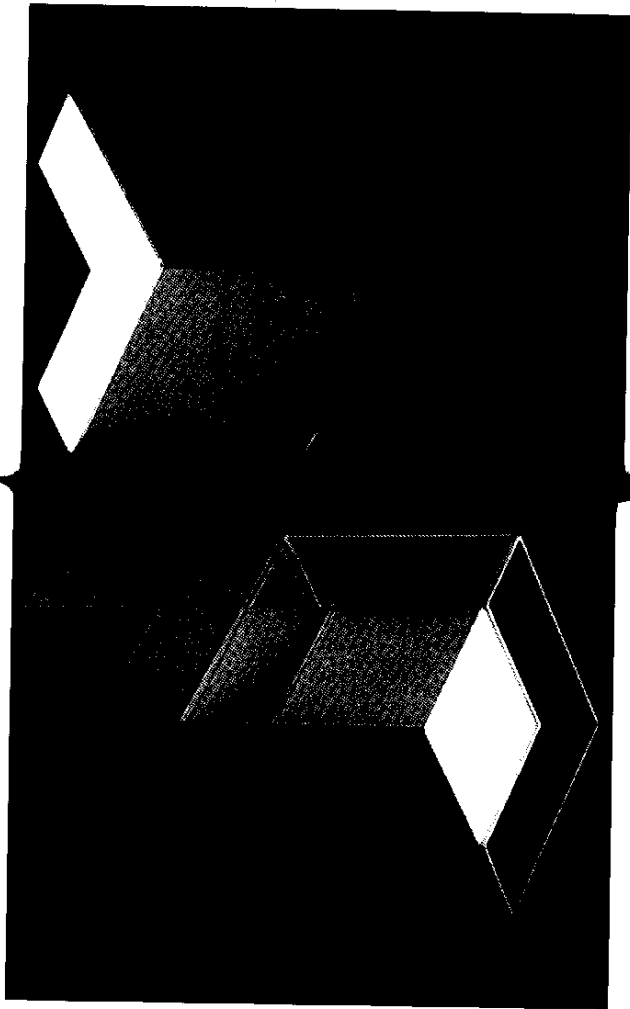
movement in architecture that it must appear *unreal*. Much more closely identified with the stuff of reality (buildings and landscapes), architecture can for this very reason be far more extreme in its denial of reality. Once conscious of the material constitution of the object, once conscious of its being cardboard, timber, concrete or glass, a morphology of this sort is conceivable but impossible. The imagination has to work in a region outside the recognized limits of the world we occupy in order to establish this one interpretive thought.

Consider how many there are like it, not just in Eisenman's work and writings but in architecture and architectural criticism in general: thousands upon thousands. Always it is words that help us believe that static things move. And who is to tell, in the circle of reciprocity between words and objects, which has priority over the other? The written words of architectural criticism are as deeply implicated in the forms of architecture as visible figures are in those of language. This should not be construed as acceding to Eisenman's claim that his work is like writing. It is not a likeness, it is an interaction that is being pointed out: a vast and essential traffic between two distinct but interdependent states. The implication of fictional movement can be suggested in writing and experienced in buildings. That one requires the other does not prove that one is like the other. We could do without morphological fictions and make architecture refer only to things that belong in the recognizable world of dependable physical qualities, but we do not and it does not. 'Punctured volume', 'compressed planes', 'scattered fenestration', 'frozen movement', 'interpenetrating spaces', 'agitated surface': it is the verbs turned into adjectives that do it. Perhaps, then, it is true that we transport the sense we make of our own active participation in the world into architecture on the back of language. Notice, though, that in this new situation it works differently. If we are still sometimes touched by the ancient idea that rocks are animate, we ourselves are in the grip of a similar

sentiment amplified by language when we think of buildings as *animated*. In its modern form it has less to do with the wilful breathing of life into inert objects, more to do with a wilful *unrealizing* of them. The hallucination of a transcendental yet entirely corporeal world is involved.

The pulling of one cube through another is typical of a host of morphological fictions that have grown up around contemporary architecture, not least through the influence of Eisenman himself. Integrated in the language of criticism, they are, for this very reason, in constant danger of becoming explanations rather than perceptions; of becoming justifications of the thing with which you happen to end up rather than properties engendered by the imagination confronted with the thing with which you happen to end up.

In the case of House X1a (Fig. 6) the question arises as to how much the property resides in the house and how much in its explanation. This sounds a dull, intransigent question because it insists on a division that Eisenman claims is no longer pertinent to his work, since the architecture is also writing. Is this not also what Barthes and Derrida have been telling us about the relation between criticism and practice, that the two are bonded and even indistinguishable? Quite true; though in this case the question is not one of interdependence and bonding, it is one of substitution and domination. To say that the model of the partially everted cube can be derived from topological reasoning or from consciousness of topological relations is not to say that any similar sense can be made of it without the help of words. To what extent is the partial eversion discernible in the House, the explanatory model, the accompanying drawings, the caption and the rest of the text? How is its presence distributed? It could be that the caption, then the drawings, then the model substitute for the property which is too faint in the house to be visible. A word can stand in front of the thing it signifies, casting so dark a shadow that only with great



6. House Xla, Palo Alto, California, 1978. Model view from east from below (left) and above (right).

difficulty can the virtual absence of the thing be made out. Maybe this is a less unusual occurrence than we would like to believe.

There is now a category of artworks that do make use of the interaction between words and pictures or words and things, the words frequently functioning as captions do, inviting the observer to read into things what words say. I am thinking of pieces by Jenny Holzer, Tom Phillips, Lawrence Wiener and John Baldessari, all of which do either or both of the following: they pull writing out of its usual more or less invisible state (you see through a word when you read it, you do not normally look at it), conferring on it an unexpected corporeality (Phillips), and, by either denying the expectation that the word refers directly to the thing on which it sits (Holzer) or making the physical substance of the word become the thing that it refers to (Wiener), they force attention away from the normally assumed correspondence between caption and image or the world and its written description, constructing instead deliberate parodies of corroboration.

Nothing could be further from Eisenman's use of writing and captions, which is thoroughly corroborative and which takes for granted the incorporeal nature of writing. Eisenman's writing is a distinct enterprise referring to the equally distinct enterprise of architectural design. Any interaction that occurs, occurs across the barrier of their difference. This does not preclude a generative relation between them. The reason for the comparison between Eisenman and these artists is not to imply that he uses words in an outmoded or improvident way, but to highlight the implicit distinction that *he* makes between writing and designing by using words the way he does.

Returning to the example of the two interpenetrating cubes and their explanation: if, in so far as he says these are topological, Eisenman is suggesting a way of imagining resemblances to other things, or of imagining morphological fictions within the strict rectilinear framework of his architecture; or raising the susceptibility to suggestion in others, he can legitimately claim that the

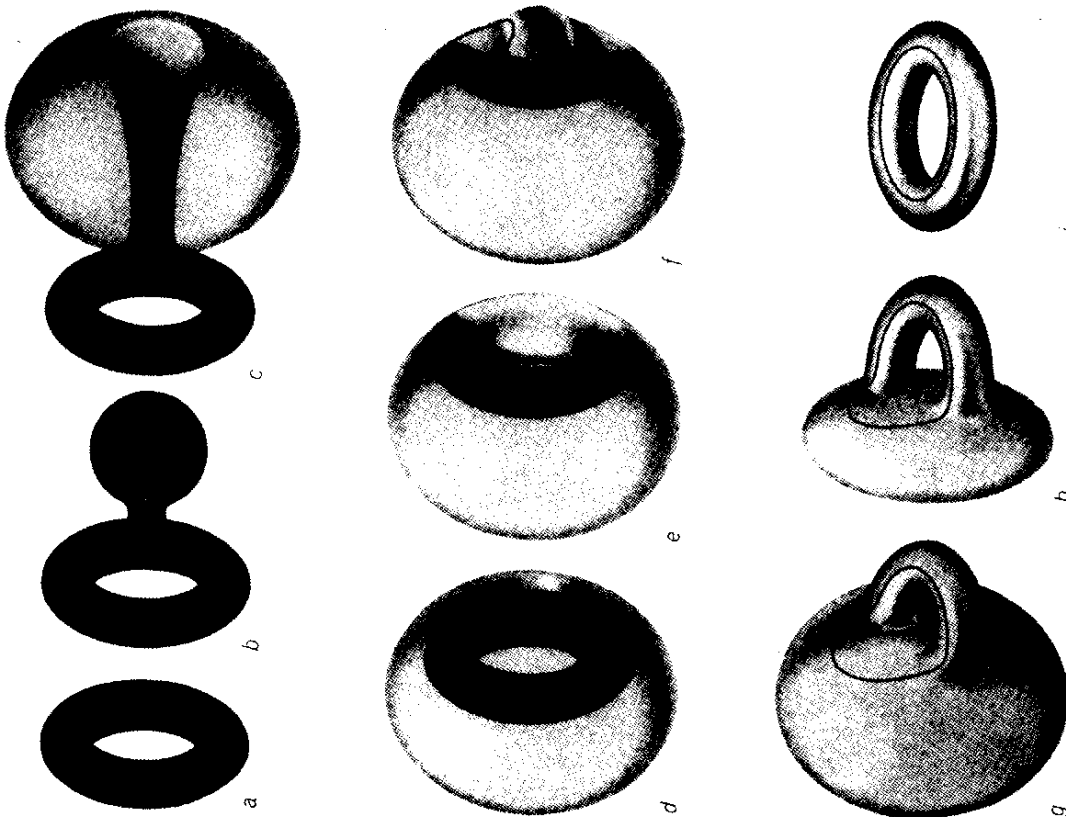
pointed finger of the instructor does not necessarily get in the way of what it points at. It may be a very useful gesture, not just for the observer, who should always take any help or instruction from the author/designer with a pinch of salt, but much more so for the author/designer who presents himself (before anyone else) with a particular region of resemblance and likeness to explore, a particular source of inspiration.

Another way in which this is made manifest in House XIa is in the two torus-like figures at the crown and base of the construction, one glass, one opaque, mirror images of each other. The figure is made of a cube from which two diagonally opposite corners have been removed (notice how easy it is for the verb remove to intimidate the imagination into applying history and movement to the inert object). Another equally compelling way of seeing the same thing is as a set of identical L-shaped elevations rotated 90 degrees, then 180 degrees, round the six faces of each cube (a preoccupation with Ls was apparent in House X and continues in *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*, though in both cases the effect is far less coherent than in House XIa). Classic examples of ambiguity, these Ls can appear to add up to a cube with corners subtracted from it, or reduce to thick frames that make a ring with a hole though the middle: a rectified torus. The torus is one of the characteristic figures of topology, prominent always in introductions to the subject (a doughnut is topologically equivalent to a teacup, both are topologically equivalent to the punctured cubes of House XIa, and all are toruses). There is no need that anyone know this in order to appreciate the extreme vividness of the form, the unusual displacement of the axis of bilateral symmetry into a three-dimensional oblique, and the considerable ingenuity with which the shape has been made out of (or pushed into) the unregenerate, constant cubic geometry of his metric architecture: the most unlikely of incarnations.

Some people do not tell you what their work means. They offer

no explanation of it. All they do is tell how it was they happened to think of doing this or how they hit upon that. Most contemporary painters and sculptors still take this line, despite the external pressure to legitimize their work by dressing it in a theory in the way that architects of note very often feel obliged to do. It is not that painters and sculptors are more honest and less pretentious: there is more advantage in it than this. It allows them to evade, to some extent, the intrusive, constricting authority of words. Although they are visual artists, there is no way they can keep their work out of range of words, any more than a writer could keep his writing out of range of vision. Since silence is no answer, they tell stories. But the telling of stories concentrates the faculties on a different range of events and circumstances than does the framing of a theory. In a story it is the fascinating, the inexplicable and the hardly credible that count. In a theory that does its job the inexplicable is explained, the fascinating is marginalized, and things at the edge of credibility are accounted for or excluded. To wrap something in stories rather than theory is to let words work at its strangeness rather than its credibility. This too can become tiresome if the words produce an artificial aura of romance (and there are very many to whom this complaint might be made). It can be seen, however, that ossification and restriction may be more easily averted.

Eisenman's artistry is partly attributable to the defective character of this theoretical writing, which occasionally descends into a lunatic, intellectual cacography bursting with the energy of half-trapped thoughts. Eisenman changes his theories while his architecture stays the same. There is no question of ossification, since the architecture has never been in serious danger of development. The rapid obsolescence of the thoughts in the writing compensates for the changelessness in the architecture. Under the circumstances there would be no point at all in demanding that the architecture live up to the writing or that the writing correspond to the architecture, reasonable as the request may seem. To make

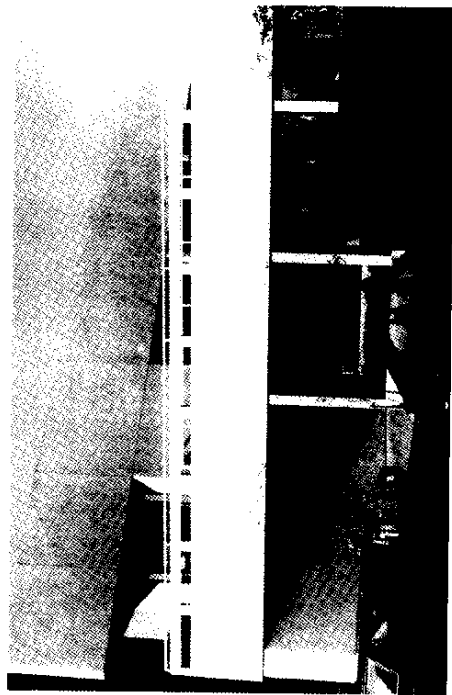


7. Turning a torus inside out. Diagram by Allan Brecchi and John Lewis, from *Scientific American*, May 1966.

either adaptation would be ruinous, because all the feverish activity circling the inert object is not without effect. It is this manic, feckless, intellectual agitation that induces the faint, subtle and spell-binding mirages of movement within (Fig. 7).

Would this suggest that, in so far as the writing does provide theories and explanations, these have always been irrelevant? Consider it another way: any technique, be it old or new, be it welding, enamelling, oil painting on canvas, architectural drawing, or the fabrication of timber-framed building, is already a restrictive practice that can be performed only within confines. To lay on top of this another confining formation, that of a regulative theory, is to reduce the field even further. It is to put oneself under a double restriction: the limited area prescribed by a theory cutting across the limited means available in a technique. Because of their inequivalence, such overlays can nevertheless exert astounding pressure at the boundaries of technique, encouraging it to expand in a certain direction. In the eighteenth century Laugier's theoretical insistence on the priority of the column helped push the technique of classical masonry construction beyond the ascertainable limits of stability to produce some light, exhilarating and quite dangerous buildings in exactly this way.

Most architectural theories are less presumptuous, accounting only for what appears to be the case according to common sense. Shaped from one set of prevailing prejudices and aimed toward another, they are rarely able to propose much more than continuity and consolidation; Eisenman's employment of the language model escapes that fate. At least it bore the prospect of doing so when he was determined to push his architecture to the limit in order to expose its Deep Structure. *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*, a disappointing piece, is a beneficiary of the attempt without being part of it. A process of exposure repeated too often becomes a ritual of reassurance. *Fin d'Ou T Hou S* is not, mind you, typical of his recent work, which relies less on the reiteration of the designer's established mode and



8. McDonald's,
San Francisco.

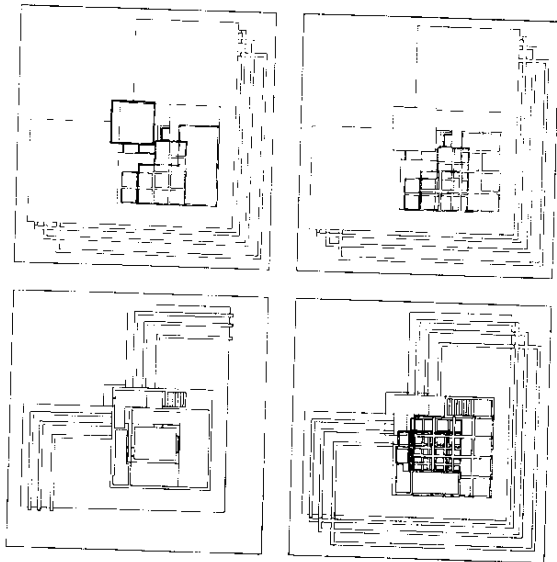
is becoming more like other things that are being done now - a hinting at reconciliation. The initiating theory, harking back to Chomsky's structuralism, no longer possesses the credibility to force the architecture out of shape, so that the architecture - an accomplished fact, a style even - is being adapted to the times, which is not very hard because American architecture has already begun to adapt to Eisenman, my favourite example of this tendency being a McDonald's in San Francisco, the interior of which, excepting the inconvenience of the diagonal, is much like McDonald's everywhere (Fig. 8).

Yet did the architecture ever take shape from the theory after the initial realization that Deep Structure could be identified with architectural abstraction? Was it not the case that the entire House series, like a little universe after its Big Bang, was the dispersal of this original idea into more and more aesthetic forms? And, in any case, was not this original idea less a forming principle than a way of justifying the further pursuit of Terragni's architecture to an

extremity of detachment? And, if so, are we not thrown back on the insidious manipulations undertaken by an aesthetic consciousness to account for almost *everything else* these schemes possess?

Much depends on what is regarded as aesthetic. In order to make sense of such a term in the House series as a whole, a distinction might best be made between an aesthetic consciousness that works to consolidate the acknowledged character of the architecture (in this case the nature of Eisenman's own earlier work plus the appropriate array of influences) and those forms of aesthetic consciousness that work against or across it. In the best of the series - House VI, House X, House XI - both are present in force.

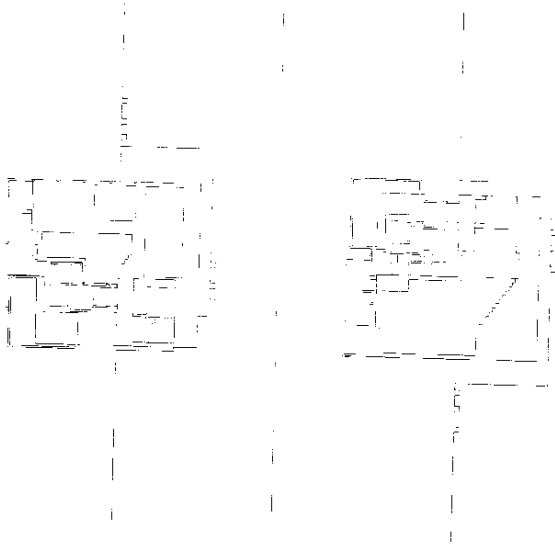
Finally, some use can be made of *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*, if only for the purpose of comparison. It is dominated by a reminiscent formalism deriving from earlier projects by Eisenman, a customized, autographic historicism that must be present in any work. What distinguishes *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*, however, is not just the absence of but the *suppression* of features that cut across this conserving, homogenizing, aesthetic tendency. It is, to a considerable extent, a reworking of House XIa. It is more like its predecessor than are any of the other houses. But, whereas House XIa is touched by adventitious ideas of form (such as the topological) that do not naturally belong, that have no right to be there, and whose presence can only be appreciated through an imaginative *unrealizing* of the object, as described above, *Fin d'Ou T Hou S* is not. All traces of foreign matter have been compositionally digested. The elevational Ls are still there, as is the bitten cube, but the torus-like figure has been lost, as indeed have most of the more potent and singular formal relationships of solid and void, mirrored forms, rotated elements and oblique symmetries in House XIa. The scrambling of these relationships is part of an equivocating compositional strategy - pursued here through the medium of the transformations - whereby any number of relatively weak or relatively familiar relationships can be built up into a composite.



9. *Fin d'Or, T'Hou S.* Fourth stage, from above, left to right: plans of first level, second level, third level and roof.

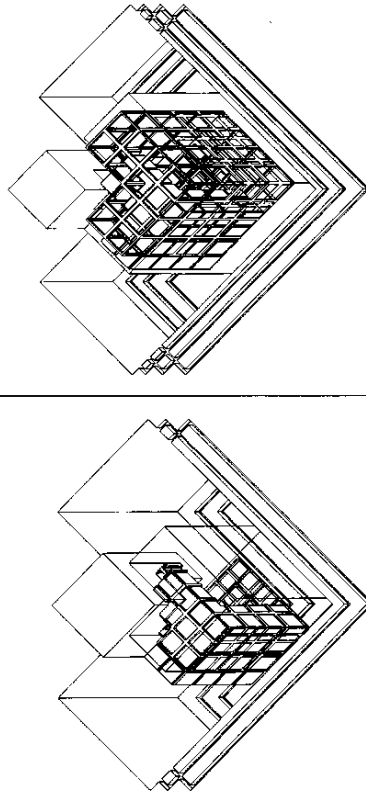
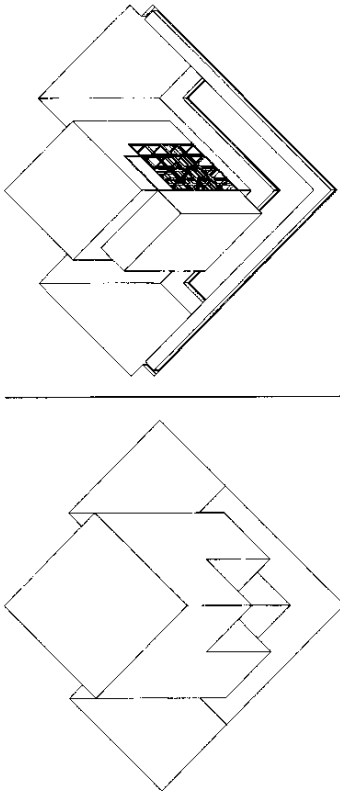
This is one well-known way of representing fullness and complexity. The trouble is that it easily ends up being a symbol of these qualities instead of exemplifying them, and destroys more than it creates in the process. The richness and variety created by breaking down and superimposing originally coherent forms is achieved at the expense of the foreanness in the work. If this is what 'reading' and 'decomposition' entail, as Jeffrey Kipnis would have us believe, then the result is not very edifying, at best a sophisticated pleasantness.

On the other hand this particular decomposition (which is eminently compositional) does show up the truly remarkable qualities of its progenitor, House XIa. In her penetrating yet appreciative account of House VI, Rosalind Krauss makes the point that, just where Eisenman's explicit intention to build forms divested of content is most blatantly contravened, the House achieves its greatest distinction: that is, in the staircases that run astride and run through the spine wall, one inverted and unusable, the other



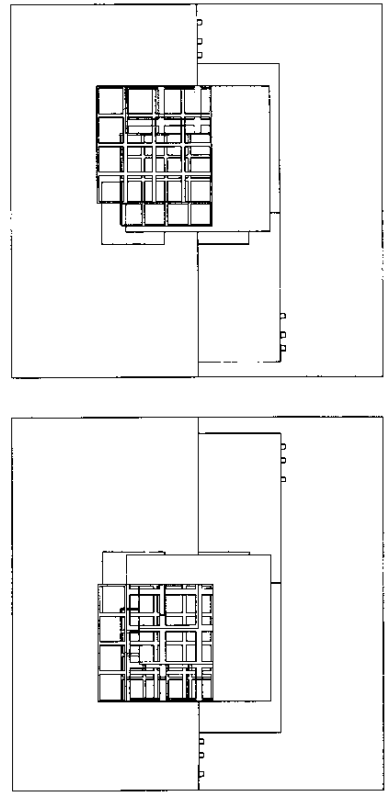
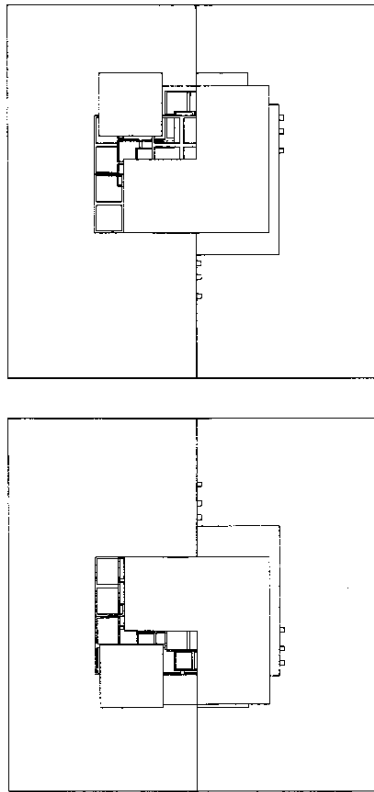
10. *Fin d'Or, T'Hou S.* Fourth stage, sections.

functioning normally. They unavoidably signify human use but play with the disruption of expectations with regard to this. In one sense the point I am making about House XIa coincides with hers about House VI. In both cases the observation is made that Eisenman's attempt to divest architecture of its superficial meaning was most revealing and effective when something prevented it from succeeding. But, whereas she shows how this failure of intent occurred as the formal enterprise became increasingly corporeal, as it was forced into use and put in confrontation with conventions of occupation and function, I have shown how it occurs also by courtesy of the designer, who, even when precisely when he is not pressured to do so, permits adventitious ideas of movement to insinuate themselves into the speechless immobility of the object. They do not disrupt or compromise the architecture: they give it an unworlly animation that takes the place of the meaning he made such efforts to evict all those years ago.



12. *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*.
 Axonometric drawings of
 the process of decomposition,
 from above, left to right:
 first stage, second stage, third
 stage, fourth stage.

11. *Fin d'Ou T Hou S*. Fourth stage,
 from above, left to right: north,
 east, south and west elevations.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: THE ARCHITECT'S OFFICE



Robin Evans

Translations from
Drawing to Building
and Other Essays