The Unavowable Community

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This part of the lecture will cover a number of important twentieth century architectural themes. These themes will show that architecture follows technological tendencies. The story begins with Le Corbusier and his ideas from the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century. Then I will discuss the sixties and seventies of the previous century. I will again talk about Le Corbusier in this period, but I will also introduce John Hejduk's work. The residential dwellings by Hejduk show the alienation of mankind in a period that man finally broke 'free' from the earth through the use of technology. Mankind enters the weightless space and sets foot on the moon. John Hejduk's houses form the first step in clarifying my new architectonical organization in the unavowable community.

1. Le Corbusier, the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century

The time in which Le Corbusier is born, at the end of the 19th century, goes hand in hand with big changes, unparalleled in human history.

… The power of labour, that is not just acceleration, mobility or display of power. For millennia people were able to exist sedentary, interrupted, indeed, by mass migrations, but nevertheless specified and directed by the longing for certainty and stability. The start of the New Times is the start of a new way of existence, that of the multiplication. The static, basalt Human World became a mobile world that didn't obtain its stability from invariability, but from growth, increase, the will of power after power…*11
('Het vrije woord', Cleverda's protest speech and the Dutch identity. Essay Th. W. Oudemans, www. Filosofie.info 2004)

Le Corbusier is raised with the evolution of cars and planes. In his early years he is aware of both sides of the technological modernizations, the motor of economic and societal changes, but also of the destruction in World War I. Le Corbusier has the remarkable talent to view and put into words all these changes from a portrayal of mankind.

In one of his most important books, *Vers une architecture* from 1923, he touches on a multitude of themes. The most important in those themes is the fact that the emerging architecture is specified by the innovative technological tendencies. For instance he discusses the increasing automobile production and the conveyor belt used in that process and comes to the following conclusion: why not apply mass production to housing construction?

From those days on all his buildings show signs of the idea that buildings are machines as well.

One thing leads to another*, and as so many cannons, airplanes, lorries and wagons had been* made in factories, someone asked the question: why not make houses?' There you really *belonging to our epoch. Nothing is ready, but everything can be done (Vers une architecture, 1923 p. 234,235)*

Furthermore Le Corbusier clarifies that man adapts to this constellation of *one thing leads to another.* The industrial world and the purely theoretical (reflective) science disappear because of the applied sciences. Mass production and industrialization have been the norm since the twenties. The conveyor belt (***one thing leads to another***) and assembly, serve as work environment for the workers. Technology helps mankind, but mankind also adapts to technology.

The father teaches no longer his son the various secrets of his little trade; a strange foreman directs severly and precisely the restrained and circumscribed tasks (Vers une architecture, 1923 p. 275)

While mankind is adapting to technology, Le Corbusier sees a problem arising for a 'special individual'. He clarifies this in the next section.

On the one hand the mass of people look for a decent dwelling, and this question is of burning importance. On the other hand the man of initiative, of action, of thought, the LEADER, demands a shelter for his meditations in a quiet and sure spot; a problem which is indispensable to the health of specialized people *1 (Vers une architecture, 1923)

He has the answer to the burning question: mass product housing. But at the same time Le Corbusier observes a problem for a sophisticated dwelling, for, in his words, the *specialized human being*. This human being cannot be one with the masses, but must be able to stand out. You could say that with the introduction of the *quiet and sure spot* he would like to reserve a space for the freedom of the individual. Can this place exist in addition to the advancing technology?

2. Le Corbusier and the sixties of the twentieth century

In the sixties of the twentieth century, technology is evolving. Technology development covers the multiplication of speed. It grows exponentially and finds a new form, more vertically oriented in an attempt to be free from the earth. Le Corbusier then finds himself in the final years of his life and sees the end coming. It takes him to his final design; a letter *Mise au point* from 1965, which he wrote two months prior to his death. These are his final memoirs and they breathe the atmosphere from a 'spiritual' testament. In this testament he describes new upcoming tendencies, among which the increasing habitual drug use ... *medication became as natural as eating for everyone ...a new industry has become*... and 'the game' as phenomenon *...only those who play are serious ... all within the rules! Nothing outside of rules! That's the key. Reason for being: to play. To participate, but as a human being that is to say, within a clear and orderly system. But first of all one must have scrutinized, seen, observed. Only then one separates sensations, perceptions, ideas. Metaphysics is but foam of the surface of a conquest...*

In addition to these remarkable observations of human changes, Le Corbusier asks himself what would be the consequences and meaning of the advancing technology, which at the same time creates tension for individual freedom. He, too, has noticed the arms race of the fifties and sixties. Threats of yet another war (after WWII) are a sign of the times, but this time it will be a nuclear war. The arms race is riddled with nuclear rockets and space travel that colonized the impossible: the space of weightlessness (homeless, no place).

In the fifties Le Corbusier introduces the *open hand* symbol, but fifteen year later, in his testament, he again calls for the establishment of this symbol, this time for placement in Chandigahr in India. With this symbol he wants to indicate a possibility for individual freedom. In his testament *Mise au point* he makes clear that he, as architect, can claim another position outside 'power'politics, in which he can stand up for the individual. He does not want to see himself placed on one line with politics, the two combating power blocks, the US and the USSR, that both also represent the new technological innovations, in the form of telecommunication, television and in 1960 even the computer.

The open hand symbol of Le Corbusier indicates that the individual, if he is driven by ideals and a strong will, can choose his own destiny. For him the open hand is a political gesture, without the image itself being political.

... Open to receive newly created wealth, open to distribute it to its people and to others. The open hand will assert that the second era of the machine age has begun: the era of harmony...

What happens to the *freedom of the individual* and what does this *era of harmony* mean?

3. John Hejduk and the sixties of the twentieth century

At the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies of the previous century, a new upcoming architect is developing. It is American John Hejduk, who also researches the freedom of the individual within the architecture, with his Wall-Houses. How important is this within the living of those days.

Hejduk's living is a continuation from Le Corbusier's living, but will have a different appearance. Where Le Corbusier concentrates on classical symbolic architecture, among which a convent and a church, John Hejduk focuses on his Wall-Houses and on living itself. Nevertheless, Hejduk displays symbolism as well. In his Wall-Houses a resident doesn't just practically live in a house.
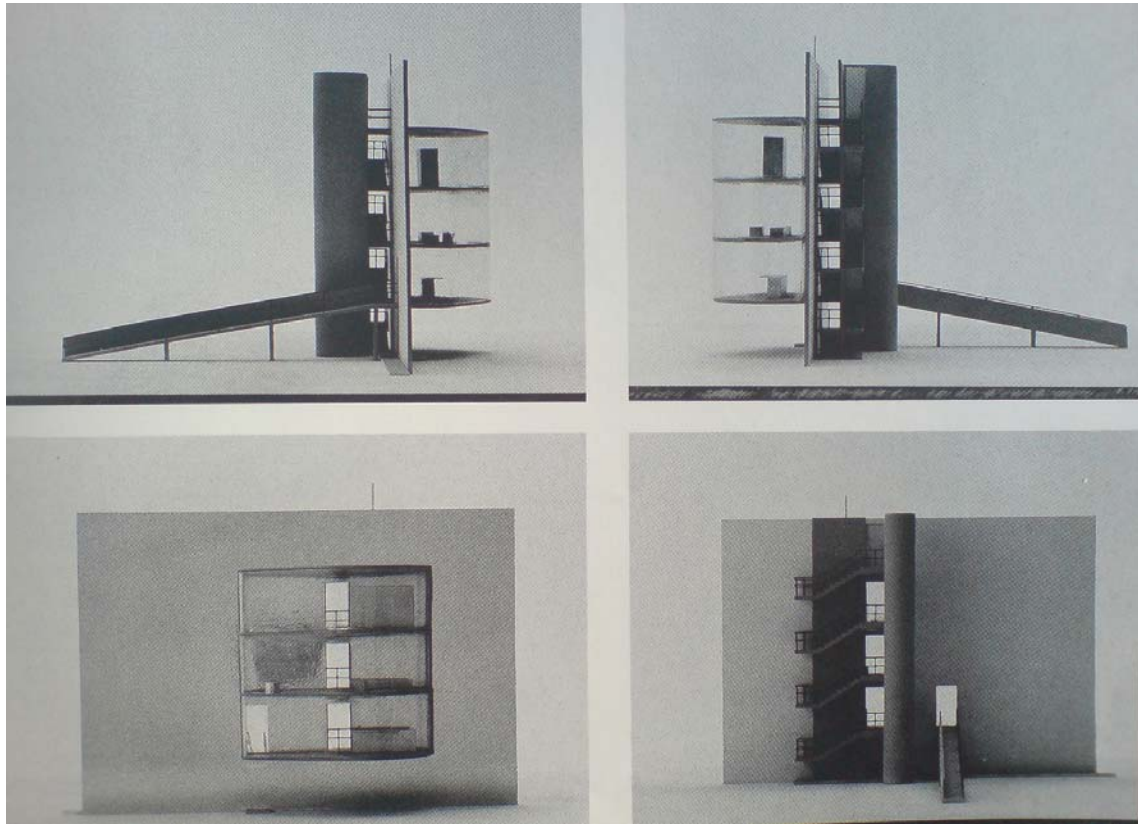
Wall House I – Masks or Medusa, John Hejduk

A colossal wall splits the areas and is enlarged. The wall becomes symbolic, because the resident of the house lives in a wall. The resident crosses the symbolic wall if he goes from one space to the next. The areas are seperated by the wall. They hang from the wall and can be reached from the main floor via long freestanding stairs. Here, too, the design seems analogue to technology, areas float above the floor. In this design, John Hejduk has given the architectonical space another clear border: A practical and symbolic wall. The design questions: What freedom does the individual have in this architectonical space? What purpose does this symbolic wall have, when the resident is completely exposed to the public. The outer walls of the areas are completely made of glass, which exposes the resident continuously to the people looking in from outside. It seems like the house robs the resident of each possibility to reach individuality. The resident is a stranger to his own house.

The Wall-Houses are variations on different themes, in which always a practical and symbolical wall is used for separation of the areas.
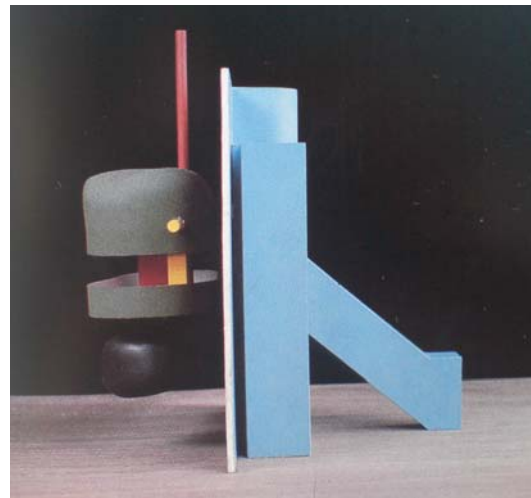
Wall House III – Masks of Medusa, John Hejduk

Le Corbusier and John Hejduk both show yet another symbolic in their architectonical designs. For Le Corbusier it can be found in the classical architectonical buildings, such as the convent and the church, the more or less secluded buildings for religious communities. In addition he also shows a symbol for everyone; the open hand symbol. This is the symbol for globalizing modernization (life). Le Corbusier emphasizes equality and uses the word *harmony*. As he says: *The creation is a specific case of human neutrality*. It is a 'place' for the individual, accessible for everybody. The symbol of the open hand is not religious (believing in God versus not believing in God) and not political (communism versus capitalism). It is the abundance influenced by the second machine age (computer, telecommunication, etc.), which must be divided fairly. The *open hand* symbol as artwork is 'separate' from his building architecture.

In John Hejduk's dwellings the symbolic wall is still manifest. The question is whether he will keep attempting to make a 'place' for the individual 'accessible'. These attempts are practical and symbolic, and show the problem at the same time. Here the individual or the resident is still alienated in relation to his dwelling and surroundings.

The symbolic and practical wall by Hejduk transforms in his later work and he researches 'a possible opening' in the design of the *New England Masque House 1979-1983*.
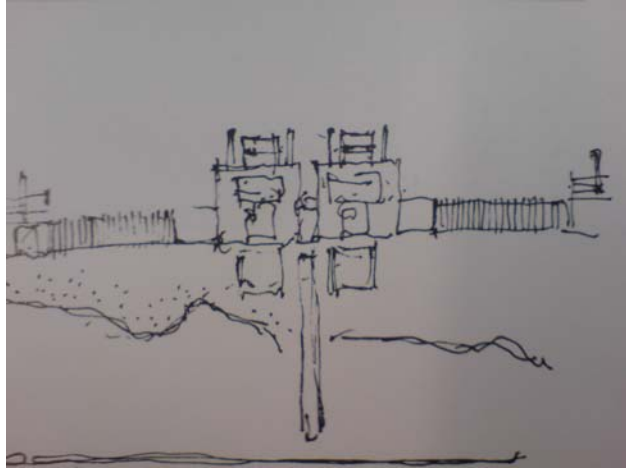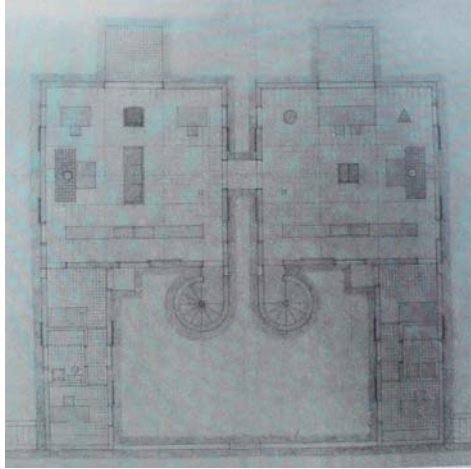
New England Masque House 1979-1983   Masks of Medusa

The design shows an alienation, except that it is between two (married) partners, that both reside in a separate part of a house. The dwelling is divided with walls and furniture to prevent the two partners from meeting each other. They live separated with minimal passageway. When asked whether there is a possibility for communication (community) between the two partners, Hejduk says: There is a possibility, but it is not likely.

As is the case with Le Corbusier, the house designs of Hejduk are a research into the appearance form of man influenced by the advancing technology. The influence of technology shows the houses with their residents as lonely landscapes in which architectonic forms take on human and inhuman characteristics.

4. The Unavowable Community 1995-1997

Based on living studies done by Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos and John Hejduk with his Wall-Houses, I have asked myself the following fundamental question in 1995:
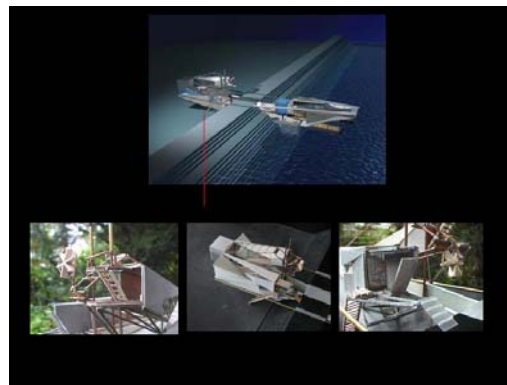
Space is movement. Volume has quality if it doesn't stop the movement, and actually strengthen it at the same time. Nevertheless, it is necessary that we border space, so it will have meaning. But if these borders are permanent, the space will become static and can't create or adopt new meaning. Therefore it is important to realize a relation between limited and unlimited. However, limited and unlimited spaces are divided by a tension field that can not explicitly become tied down.

How then do people relate to each other regarding this space? Can they still experience it jointly or in other words: can we think of a space that offers the possibility for a community?

The result is *The Unavowable Community* which, as title, is derived from the booklet that carries the same name, published in nineteeneightyfour, by Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003). He was philosopher and an important French literary critic, who greatly influenced the post modernistic literary criticism. He was a friend of Georges Bataille. In this booklet he clarifies his thoughts on the possibility of such a community. From the viewpoint of several themes divided in two chapters: the negative community and the community of the lover, he shows how he thinks about a community that seems to rule out a shortcoming of language and what would be the possibility of such a community and at the same time the impossibility of the communal one.
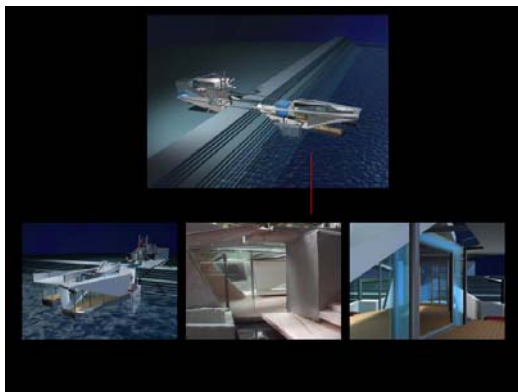
Shared Living Dancer   Shared Living Astronaut
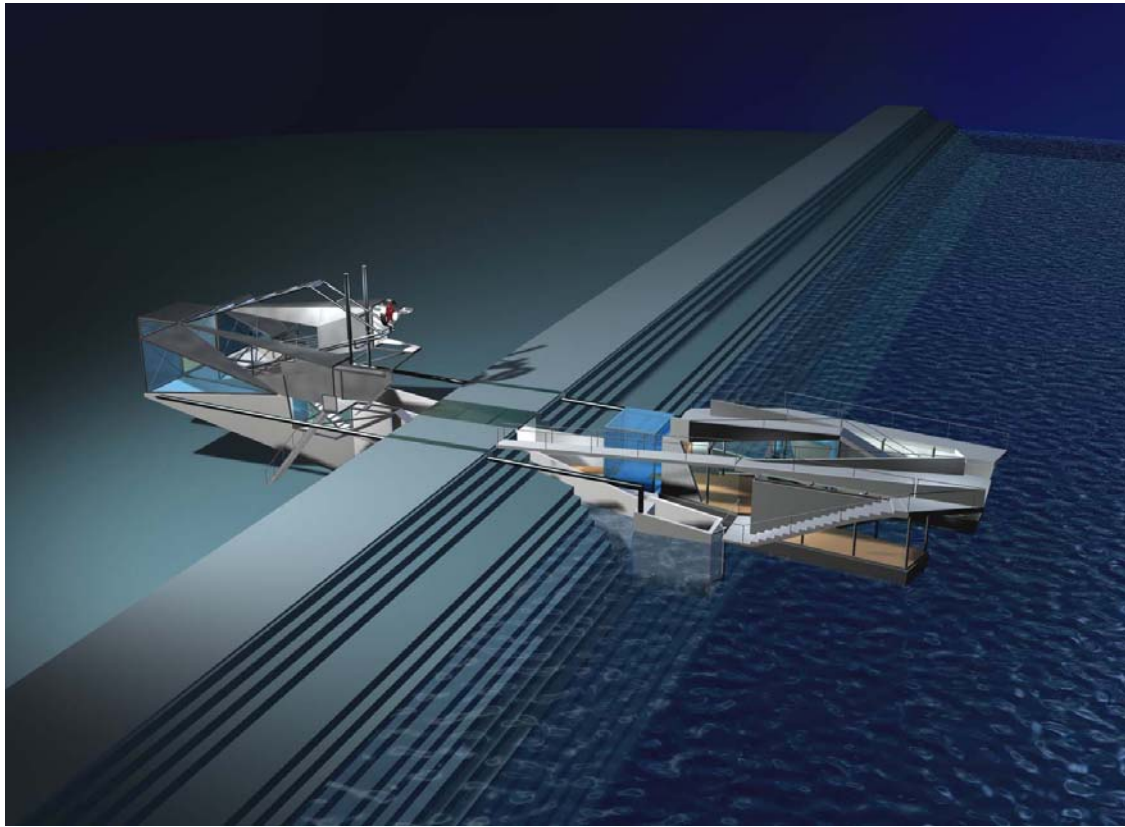
The architectonic design result is a 'twin-house' for a dancer and an astronaut. The design forms an answer to the question whether there will still be an opportunity for a space that offers the possibility for a communal experience. At first sight the motivations of the dancer and the astronaut are completely opposite. But there are similarities as well. The astronaut is the resident that portrays technology. He reached weightlessness by moving as **little as possible.** The dancer, on the other hand, reaches apparent weightlessness by moving a lot.

The design consists of two dwellings, that at first seem autonomously shaped, each with their own programme, established through consultation with an astronaut and a dancer. Nevertheless they derive their right to existence from their mutual involvement, which can not be taken for granted and which is never permanent, and in that sense remains unspeakable. The connection between both dwellings 'which allows the astronaut to learn to dance' is not a given, not a permanent situation, but is constantly shaped and only exists as tension and as dynamic. There is no status quo; there is an ever changing intensity, a polarity. The design derives its strength from the fact that literary metaphors (wind and water) are not immediately translated in the shape, but becomes part of the design by way of the link of technology. The

location on both sides of the dike is fortunate - a dike, as well as the design, facilitates the seeping through (of water), and establishes communication as well as seclusion.

The unavowable community is a shelter by the grace of wind and water, the elementary powers that aren't excluded because of architecture, but embraced. It shows 'free' energy in the form of wind and running water. They deliver energy to move the house. The 'free' energy is the condition under which an unavowable community can be established. The 'free' energy brings rhythm and change, such as ebb and flow as a result of gravity. 'Free' energy changes the house, but it also changes the way in which we deal with energy. Sun, wind and water are technologies in the design.

The design maintains the tension between inside and out, with borders that are not permanent, since the shape escapes in the counter shape. The design doesn't really wish to affirm itself; it doesn't want to draw attention to itself, but to the unavowable from the space. In that sense a design should be found, not searched.

The unavowable community is a feedback system and an icon of 'free' energy!

Examples of feedback systems:

a. **One thing leads to another,** *Le Corbusier* > *returns to himself. It can be seen as a 'kreisgang', which is not circular, since it feeds back. It is a matter of constant change (adaptation) and when something doesn't work anymore, or when it is insufficient, it will be replaced. (* Das Gestell – Heidegger and Le Corbusier, Brent Batstra, 2001)

b. *Thanks to technology, for instance satellites that circulate the earth at a distance and provide humankind in many ways (CO_2, ecology etc.) with information on the limited habitable earth, earth and mankind appear as feedback mechanism.*

c. *On the one hand, trucks are produced one by one, following serial guidelines, so they are permanently deliverable after ordering. On the other hand, they will be ordered to*

deliver goods. The factory delivers the truck, the truck delivers the goods which the factory needs. In such a feedback system there is no longer a hierarchy. The truck serves the factory and the factory serves the truck. Both are equal in that sense. (Das Gestell – Heidegger and Le Corbusier, Brent Batstra, 2001)

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