

Idea as Model, Model as Idea. The Axonometric Model of House X by Peter Eisenman

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“The axonometric model of House X is a three-dimensional construction made to provide the image of a two-dimensional drawing. It does not provide knowledge of the object in a dimensional sense; it is not about reality, but about fiction; it provides phantasmagoric images –a sequence of anamorphisms– among which the ‘right’ image is very difficult to discover. It makes the ‘normal’ image appear to be an anomaly: we perceive it only at the instant where we see the false image –the model as a two-dimensional drawing– while the ‘abnormal’ images are in fact the only ones that describe the true nature of the three-dimensional object, the model” [Gandelonas 1979, p. 25] [1].

Albeit with discontinuity, the history of representation is punctuated by imaginative impulses apparently lacking operational results, and for this reason dismissed as *caprices* or at most as *divertissements*, but which conversely, if taken up and developed, could have opened

up new horizons. In art, as well as in architecture. I am thinking of Opicino de Canistris’s maps, where autobiographical memories mingle with topographical elements [Belardi 2022], of Lorenz Stöer’s fantastical landscapes, in which a mix of polyhedral solids and ruinous architecture provides paradoxical visions [Wade 2015, pp. 169-204], and of Ennemond-Alexandre Petitot’s grotesque costumes, conceived by ingeniously combining anatomical parts and classical fragments [Cirillo 2002]. Just as I think of Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz’s perspectival obliquations, interpreters of an architecture legitimized by divine perfection [Sabaino, Pissavino 2012] and with these, coming to the present day, I think of Peter Eisenman’s conceptual diagrams [Eisenman 1999]. Above all, I am thinking of the axonometric model of House X: a “strange anamorphism” [Falzea 1993, p. 176] built by

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Eisenman using wood and cardboard [1], and on whose polysemic value Eisenman repeatedly confronts Vittorio De Feo, author in the same years of an equally singular perspective device aimed at simulating the functioning of an exhibition pavilion based on specular reflections [2]. And, just as De Feo's model betrays the author's interest in the illusionistic virtuosités of Andrea Pozzo, in that it is substantiated by the perceptual ambiguity between real plan and virtual plan, Eisenman's model betrays the author's interest in the figurative implosions of Giuseppe Terragni, in that it represents "an architecture that has become merely a language that explodes into itself" [Saggio 1996, p. 16].

The story of House X is well known [Eisenman 1982a], but, on closer inspection, it is worth retracing, because it marks a clear watershed not only in the context of Peter Eisenman's professional career, but also, and perhaps above all, in the context of his life story. In 1975, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Aronoff commissioned Eisenman, at the time director of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York City, to design a single-family residence in the vicinity of Bloomfield Hills, a small municipality located in the state of Michigan, specifically in Oakland County. The chosen site was strongly characterized from an environmental standpoint because, being part of a steeply sloping wooded area, it was very panoramic and contained three pre-existing structures: a swimming pool, a tennis court and a summer house. Eisenman, aspiring to design a work worthy of joining the exclusive club of Iconic Houses (from Robert Venturi's Vanna Venturi House to Richard Meier's Smith House, from Stanley Tigerman's Marion House to Frank O. Gehry's Gehry Residence), was strongly motivated to take his design idea all the way to the building site phase. So much so that, for the first time, he abdicated ideological abstraction and rooted the project in the site. [Perbellini 1998, p. 65], while articulating the building into four autonomous bodies to reduce the volumetric impact, introducing an annular path through the house to connect it to the three pre-existing structures, and by juxtaposing the orthogonality of the Cartesian grid of the planimetric layout on the sinuosity of the contour lines of the terrain to enhance the orographic irregularities. But, above all, he created a striking micro-city, in some ways similar in figurative abstraction to the models held by patron saints in medieval pictorial representations: a micro-city marked by the idea of ruin

and decay, composed by means of an agglomeration of forms, positioned at different levels and of different heights, traversed by a system of vertical communications open to the surrounding landscape, enlivened by an arrangement of jutting volumes and hollowed-out corners, as well as characterized by unusual finishes such as metal mesh, modular glazed cages and aluminum panel cladding. Finishes that would later be taken up and elevated to veritable *griffes* by Frank O. Gehry, Oswald Mathias Ungers and Richard Meier.

However, luck was not on Eisenman's side. In fact, his clients decided not to realize the project, melancholically relegating House X to the realm of paper architecture. It was a decision that plunged Eisenman into a state of severe depression, prompting him to embark on psychoanalytic therapy [3] which, in the following years, would lead him to reconsider the radical nature of his theoretical approach and equip himself to compete professionally by founding a full-fledged architectural firm. But, before moving on, Eisenman confirmed the research carried out from House I to House VI, marked by the propensity to recognize the value of an architecture in the abstraction of the ideational process rather than in the concreteness of the constructive translation, by integrating the project drawings, notably the ever-present axonometric exploded views chosen as a "compositional method" [Trentin 1999, p. 41], with an axonometric model that, almost freezing the still-image of the building's spectacular collapse following a devastating seismic event, affirmed its "nonvertebrate" nature [4]. Nor could it have been otherwise, given Eisenman's predilection for the use of axonometric projection [5]. What resulted was a model "in which photography can only be taken from a single point of view" [Franco Taboada 2019, p. 315], that is, an axonometric model that, while claiming the autonomy of representation, where the ultimate reality is the model and not the built building [6], also undermines the very foundations of representation, where it tends to invalidate the constitutive rules of axonometry. For, while axonometry "implies the rotation upon itself of the object in space as seen by an observer unrelated to the object or the rotation of the observer around the object, the axonometric model as conceived by Eisenman negates the rotation of both the object and the observer, forcing this and that into the immobility of the one determined point of view from which the axonometric view is had, not unlike a single perspective point of view" [Ciucci

1993, p. 9]. After “four hundred years of latent classicism” [Eisenman 1992, p. 17], both the linearity of the subject-object relationship and the consequentiality of the ideation-realization relationship are challenged by a model that, in ratifying “the End of the Classical” [Eisenman 1984], is promoted from a communicative tool,

aimed at illustrating the functioning of the design idea, to a heuristic pretext, aimed at exploring the valences, even unforeseen, of the design idea: it is no longer the model that is the representation of the design idea, but it is the design idea that is the representation of the model. Idea as Model, Model as Idea [7].

Notes

[1] “The result, drawn up by the architect himself, uses mainly wood and its derivatives, such as different types of cardboard” [Franco Taboada 2019, p. 315].

[2] “The perspective depth of the pavilion is illusively constructed, relying on the virtualities of the reflections of angled mirrors. The project has demonstrative value; in fact, it tends to highlight, to the limit of paradox, the ambiguous relationship between structure and image in architecture” [Conforti, Dal Co 1986, p. 110]. The comparisons between Peter Eisenman and Vittorio De Feo on the demonstrative value of the two devices, which took place in the early 1980s in the Roman studio in Via Angelo Brunetti, are referable to the direct testimony of the writer.

[3] “House X was the end of a certain phase. I started psychoanalysis when I went to Venice to do Cannaregio instead of House X. The clients wanted to start that summer and I said ‘No, I want to do Cannaregio’ and when I came back the house has been abandoned. It is then I felt that I needed to go into therapy. I was really upset, having spent so much time on an house and then not having it built” [Eisenman 1988, p. 51].

[4] “Most houses are conceptually vertebrate. That is, in addition to their literal, necessary condition of structure they are metaphorically vertebrate. They have a center, usually a hearth or a stair; their roofs pitch from the center; and their construction exhibits a concern for an overall centrality. [...] House X is nonvertebrate.”: the text, written by Peter Eisenman and taken from <<https://eisenmanarchitects.com/House-X-1975>> (accessed April 5, 2014), is cited in Aureli, Biraghi, Purini 2007, p. 88.

[5] “Eisenman declared a specific predilection for axonometric projection especially early in his career. Already in his recently published doctoral thesis at Trinity College, the author conspicuously uses the tool of axonometry to explore architecture. There are many works of architecture reproduced in parallel projection in the three geometric axes of reduction within the thesis: ranging from several of Le Corbusier’s villas to Terragni’s *Casa del Fascio*, just to mention the most significant examples. The aim is to analyze their characteristics, especially in the mass-surface relationship which, as he states, “received its initial definition in Le Corbusier’s *Quatre compositions*.” From this work of decomposition Eisenman was to initiate a precise operation of objective description of his early projects by making use of parallel projection: for example, House I of 1967-68 or the subsequent House II (1969-1970), of which he would say that “the house looks like and is constructed like a model.” Compositional diagrams show the ideational stages, also re-proposed for the following House III (1969-71) and even more so in House IV” [Sdegno 2019, p. 1378].

[6] “Generally, a scale model is a three-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional reality. An axonometric drawing is a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional reality. An axonometric model differs from an axonometric drawing in that although it is a representation, it does not represent a real object, but the transformation of an object. It is both process and reality and as such represents the drawing rather than the building” [Eisenman 1982b, p. 70].

[7] *Idea as Model* is the title of an exhibition, curated in 1976 by Peter Eisenman at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, in which models of the most significant works in the history of architecture of the second half of the twentieth century were presented [Frampton, Kolbowski 1981].

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