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## Transscape:scenar(io) pasT; Is the scape over?

*In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.*

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Please follow me into the *text*: Peter Eisenman's journey through the *scape of writing...*

*Scape*: understood as *the scene of something*, in our case the *scene of writing*.  
*Transscape*: through the *scene of writing*.

By analysing the work of the American architect Peter Eisenman, who more than anybody else with his work and research delved into the scape of writing, we will propose the following assumption: the relationship of his projects to their context is a consequence of the kind of linguistic strategy that he used for his designs. Whilst in Eisenman's *scape of writing* we will also consider parallels in literature that will help us to clarify his position. At the end we might discover whether Eisenman, like Alice, has found his way out of Wonderland, whether he left the *scape of writing* or not.

### The scape of writing

In his text on the magic pad of Freud, Jacques Derrida introduces the concept of the *scene of writing* in Psychology.<sup>1</sup> He stresses the importance of Freud's research on the translation of the psychic language into a comprehensible idiom, as a means to interpret the unconscious. The space of this language, the *scene of writing*, is explained by Freud's famous metaphor of the writing pad, an apparatus that permits to explain metaphorically how the unconscious works. The *scene of writing* of the psyche as a particular case of spatiality that has to be translated into an understandable language, to allow us to understand it. According to Franco Rella,<sup>2</sup> this is one of Freud's most significant achievements: having found a way to express the inexpressible, to have given a codification to the subconscious. By doing this, Freud overcomes the rationality of the classical and gives expression to the irrational of our unconscious. It is in a sense the inverted motivation of what Rella recognized in Freud that pushed Eisenman at the end of the sixties to delve into the space of linguistics. Since the beginning of his work, Eisenman recognized the need to push the limits of architecture and introduce the crisis of modernity into a discipline that until then was enclosed in a sterile self-referentiality. He achieved this by introducing linguistics into architecture, a discourse that is both external and internal to it. In linguistics, Eisenman found what Kurt Forster defined as a "parallel universe" for architecture.<sup>3</sup>

1 Jacques Derrida, Freud and the Scene of Writing, in: Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated, with an introduction and additional notes by Alan Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1978

2 Franco Rella, *il silenzio e le parole, il pensiero nel tempo della crisi*, Feltrinelli Editore, Milano, 1981  
„È la tranquillità con cui Freud, a partire da questa incongruenza, da questo „intimo paludoso”, da questo impensato, cerca di costruire la logica dell'inconscio. La logica di ciò che nel linguaggio della razionalità classica era indicibile: il conflitto che costituisce il soggetto come un campo di tendenze opposte fra loro, come un campo di lotta e battaglia, con pluralità e contraddizione.”

3 Kurt W. Forster, *How Eisenman Cut the Gordian Knot of Architecture*, Yale seminar: Eisenman, Krier: two ideologies", Yale, 8.11.2002

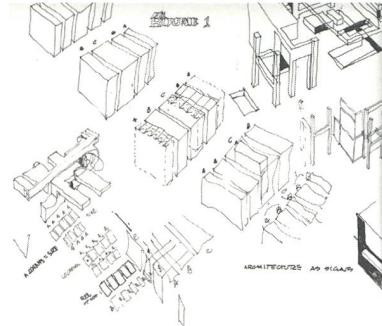
## Text-text / figure-figure

In the first phase of his work, Eisenman introduced the notion of deep and surface structure and the concept of a generative grammar, appropriated from the American linguist Noam Chomsky.<sup>4</sup> Eisenman fostered an understanding of architecture as a syntactic / structural system as opposed to the then current tendencies of his time where architecture was rather proposed as a semantic/ form system. In order to overcome a formal, figurative understanding of architecture, Eisenman started a series of projects that were the result of processes that could have been compared to Chomsky's generative grammar series. He applied this system to his *Cardboard House* series.<sup>5</sup> It is important to observe that the title of the *Houses* "Cardboard" is a denotation of their content: The houses are presented as if made of cardboard, not as much because of their weak materiality, as to underline their conceptual status. The houses, most of them have been built, might be understood as *machines* that undermine the tradition of architecture. The ground elements of architecture, such as plane and column are put through a transformational process that undermine all types of traditional readings and understandings of the elements themselves but also of their relationships such as symmetry and function. Eisenman compared linguistic signs with architectonic signs. While the former has a transparent relationship that can be made opaque as is the case in poetry (where the one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified is blurred), Eisenman argues that the architectonic signs has no possibility of such a blurring. A column is always at the same time the column itself as an object and as the sign of it. He overcame this association by loosening the relationship between object and sign; in his *Houses*, for example, columns are not necessarily structural and thus displace the observer.

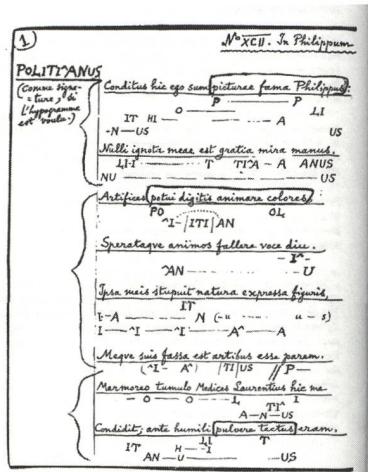
As a result of syntactical procedures, *House I – House X* are completely *contextless*. Nothing in the process of making suggested any implication or consideration to their surroundings. Ironically confirming Eisenman's approach, an Italian architecture journal once published an article on *House II* and annotated the image of the actual built house as "the model of *House II*." This kind of misreading, for Eisenman, were welcomed *accidents de parcours* that testified the multiplicity of his architecture.

There was no relationship to the context (i.e. the outside space) even if it could not be ignored. This first phase of work on semiotics focused on what he called the *interiority of architecture*, the inner laws of the discipline. Eisenman invented rules that he imposed onto his grammar of elements that resulted in a self-referential narrative, this system was confirmed by his naming of the *Houses* which suggest them as a series and by his diagrams that were used to explain the genesis of the project. In the diagrams single elements were presented as signs that were combined through the syntactical processes which in turn obscured their readability. Nevertheless, the experience of the *Houses* could be compared to the displacement of watching a film that cannot ignore the outside, but an outside that is conceptually separated from the *House*.

*Fin d'Ou S House* (1983), despite having a different relationship to the context than his previous houses (it creates its own context and by that it is still *contextless*), might serve as an example to underline the consequent negation of context native to the transformational procedures of the *Houses*. The name



Peter Eisenman, sketches *House I*, architecture as sign



Ferdinand De Saussure, *Politianus*, comme signature, si l'hypogramme est voulu

4 In *Notes on conceptual architecture: towards a definition*, Eisenman refers to Chomsky by two footnotes: "28 See Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian Linguistics*, Harper and Row, New York and London, 1966, p.47; 30 For an explanation of deep and surface structure, see any number of texts by Noam Chomsky. For a less technical description in a linguistic sense, see his *Language and Mind*, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., New York, 1968."

5 Peter Eisenman, *House I*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1967-68 – *House X*, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1975, unrealised

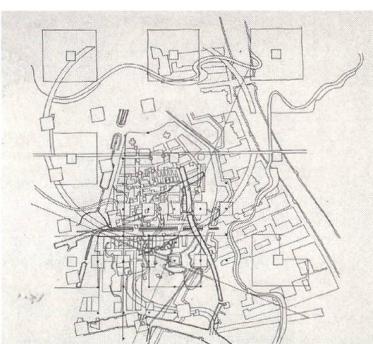
of the house was anagrammatically created to have at least nine possible readings, such as *Find Out Hou* (find out how), *Fin D out* (find out), *Fin D'Aout* (end of August, the month of the design of the house); even *Fondue* is a possible reading. Since anagrams are a “closed” linguistic procedure and because of the close relationship proposed by Eisenman between the playful combinatory possibilities of the title to the content of the design, the result can only be the same as an anagram, self-referential. We might compare this anagrammatic design procedure to the analysis on anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure, who is considered the founder of modern sciences of language. As Jean Baudrillard suggested,<sup>6</sup> only the constitutive work of Saussure, his *Cours de linguistique générale*,<sup>7</sup> has been taken over by his followers, while the more problematic and critical work on *anagrams* had almost been forgotten. Eisenman, in a certain sense, has carried on this discourse, but while his Houses were “coding” processes, inversely the work of De Saussure was an attempt to “decode” hidden motivic-themes in poetic texts.

Besides his designs, Eisenman produces texts and books that oscillate on the one hand between criticism and poetics and on the other between architecture and literature. *Notes on conceptual architecture: towards a definition*,<sup>8</sup> 1970, was in the first draft a “conventional” text, but became, in the second draft, when it was reduced just to the footnotes, a white page with numbers distributed on its surface. By this, Eisenman takes the materiality of the text off and simultaneously opens up a new possibility of understanding the spatiality of text. He reflected the influence of the linguistic experience he introduced in architecture back into literature.

### Narrative-text / ground-figure

"I should tell you first that I am no longer interested in semiology. I am interested in poetics, and I think they are very different concerns. Equally, I am no longer interested in philosophy, but rather fiction. I think fiction is much more philosophical than philosophy. I do not have much relationship today with my earlier work dealing with syntax. I do not reject it or deny it. It merely is something else."<sup>9</sup> Eisenman introduced a second phase of his work that was based both on a shift of his interest from semiotics to narrative, as well as by a major interest in the context of his projects. As we will see these two facts are strongly related. In order to introduce linguistic strategies also in the context, he had to consider it as a text that can be re-written and that the result of his intervention should be readable in different ways. The idea of the city as a text has also been analysed by Roland Barthes in his essay on *Urbanism and Semiotics*,<sup>10</sup> where he underscored the necessity of an understanding of the language of the city not as metaphor but as object that can be studied according to the laws of semiotics.

In Bernard Tschumi's *Parc de La Villette* in Paris, Eisenman developed a small, unrealised project with Jacques Derrida in 1986 where they translated modes of writing into architecture. The starting device for the project was a reading of *Plato's Timeus* and of his concept of the *Chora*. Metaphor and allegory were treated as diagrams to introduce different scales and different times into the project. These methods resulted in processes of scaling, dislocation and displacement, creating a space of other times and spaces.



Peter Eisenman *Parc de la Villette*

6 Jean Baudrillard, *De la Séduction*, Gallimard, Paris, 1979

7 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Editions Payot, 1922

8 Peter Eisenman, *Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition*, Design Quarterly, 78/79, 1970

9 Peter Eisenman, *Yale Seminars in Architecture*, Vol 2, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1982

10 Roland Barthes, *Semiotik und Urbanismus*, 1971, from: *Die Stadt als Text*, Verlag Ernst Wasmuth, Tübingen, 1976, orig. *Sémiologie et Urbanisme*, L'architecture d'aujourd'hui, 153, 1976

11 Peter Eisenman, *Architecture and the Problem of the Rhetorical Figure*, *Architecture and Urbanism*, No. 202, 1987

In his text, *architecture and the problem of the rhetorical figure*,<sup>11</sup> Eisenman refers to the distinction in linguistics that Derrida makes between the aesthetic and the rhetorical; language suppresses the former in favour of the latter. In architecture the condition is inverted and Eisenman recognized the need to uncover the repressed rhetorical quality by loosening the one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. The rhetorical figures he introduced into architecture provided an alternate reading of the site as a palimpsest and aimed for the same goals as the syntactical processes of the *Houses*, but included the context. When the body of text was removed, leaving only the footnotes in *Notes on conceptual architecture* it gave a new spatiality to the text, in the same manner as the transformation of allegory from mode of writing literature to a mode of writing space inflected this space with the literal qualities of these methods.

Jacques Lacan, the French psychologist who fostered a new understanding of Freud's theory, talking about the language of the unconscious, affirmed that: "The important part begins with the translation of the text, the important part which Freud tells us is given in the (verbal) elaboration of the dream. In other words, in its rhetoric. Ellipsis and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition – these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis, antonomasis, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche – these are the semantic condensations in which Freud teaches us to read the intentions – ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive – out of which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse."<sup>12</sup>

It is the same strategy that Eisenman chose many years later. While Freud had to find the language of the unconscious to allow its expression, Eisenman introduced a language into architecture to expose it to modern thought. In a discussion with Derrida, Eisenman explained the experience of the projects that: "It should be reading *Finnegans Wake* for the first time."<sup>13</sup> Starting from the *contextless* syntactical strategies discussed earlier, the introduction of narrative modes of writing causes a shift towards an interaction with the context in his projects. Talking about *Finnegans Wake*, Michael Kaufman explained the relationship between the text to the context this way: "Cycling the world into the text, Joyce creates a textual world and, in the process, shows the world as text."<sup>14</sup> The procedure of Joyce is spatial both on the level of the expression, where words are subject to transformations and on the level of content where a non-linear narrativity forces the reader to flow in a labyrinthine world. The world as context and the level of expression as text are intertwined. The same can be said of Eisenman's projects where the context as a text is the starting point for a set of deformations that can be compared to Joyce's literal procedures. Basing his design strategy on writing techniques appropriated from linguistics, the physically tangible outcome of Eisenman's project suggests an intertwining of the context, which is re-written by the chosen modes of writing.

Derrida and Eisenman also collaborated on a book discussing their common experience, entitled *Chora L Works*,<sup>15</sup> another wordplay with different meanings: choral work and chora. The matrix of the actual project had been transferred onto the book to create a set of holes, which makes the book

thoroughgoing trotty the first down Spanish Place, Mayo I make, Tuam I take, Sligo's sleek but Galway's grace, Holy eel and Sainted Salmon, chucking club and ducking dace, Rodiron's not your aequal! says she, leppin half the lane, abcd) A bell a bell on Shalldoll Steepbell, ond be'll go masspon pristmoss spepole, Shand praise gon ness our fayst moan people, our prime Shan-deepen, pay name myy sefence, moy nay non Aeguall!!!!!!

5. Whad slags of a loughlaud would retten smuttyflesks, emp-tout old mans, melk vitiou geit, scareoff jackinjills fra tiddle anding, smoothpick waste papish pastures, insides man outsiders angell, sprink drited water around village, newses, tobaggon and sweds, plain general kept, louden on the kirkpeal, footreats given to malafides, outhsirek hyelp hyelf nor his hair efer buggelaurs, might underhold three barnets, putzpolish crotty bottes, nightcover all fireglims, serve's time till haas, grind-stone his knives, fullest boarded, lewd man of the method of godliness, perchance he meows and chans sits in the spoorwagen, X.W.C.U. on Z.W.C.U., Doorsteps, Limited, or Baywindaws Bros swobber preferred. Walther Clauseuter's and Sons with the H. E. Chimneys' Company to not skeeve, will, on advices, be bacon or stable hand, must begripe fullstandingly irers' language, jublander or northquin bigger prefurred, all dutys, kine rights, family feuds, outings fived, may get earnst, no get combisch, profusional drinklards to please obstain, he is fatherlow sound-digged inmoodminned pershoon but aleconnerman, nay, that must he isn't

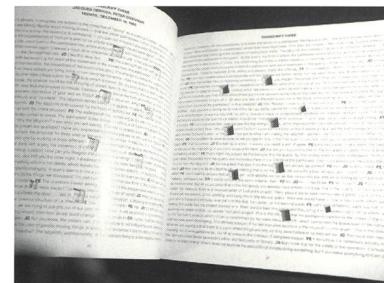
Answer: Pow ole Joe!

6. What means the saloon slogan Summon In The House-sweep Dinah?

Answer: Tok. Galory bit of the sales of Cloth nowand I have to beeswax the bringing in all the claub of the porks to us how I thought I knew his stain on the flower if me ask and can could speak and he called by me midden name Tik. I am your honey honeysugger phwphphwth tha Bay and who bruk the dandless and who seen the blackullen jam for Tomorrha's big pickneck I hope it'll pour prais the Climate of all Ireland I heard the

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James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*



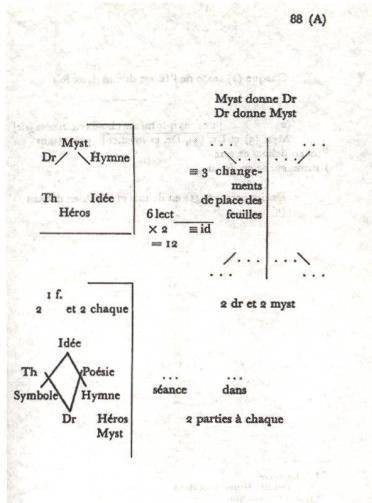
Peter Eisenman, Jacques Derrida, *Chora L Works*

12 Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the self. The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* by Jacques Lacan, Delta Book, New York, 1968. *The function of Language in Psychoanalysis* was originally published as *Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse*, in *La Psychanalyse, Vol I.*, Paris, 1956, and later in Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*, Paris Éditions du Seuil, 1966

13 Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, edited by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leeser, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1997

14 Michael Kaufman, *Textual bodies, Modernism, Postmodernism and Print*, Bucknell University Press, London and Toronto, 1994

15 Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, edited by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leeser, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1997



Stéphane Mallarmé, notes for *le Livre*

partially unreadable, suggesting an architectural treatment of literature. It is as if the experience of Joyce would have been brought to architecture and back, keeping the brand marks of this experience in the physicality of the holes. Compared to the *Notes*, *Chora L Works* leaves the boundaries of the book.

#### Narrative-narrative / ground-ground

In order to introduce the next phase of Eisenman's work, where linguistics seems to no longer be an issue as was the case in the two previous phases we analysed, we will have a look at one of his latest projects that is currently under construction, the Ciudad da Cultura de Galicia, the result of a competition that Eisenman won in 1999. The design process is based on a genetic implantation of two elements into the site of the project: on the one hand the lines of the old centre of Santiago, on the other, the image of the shell that is a symbol of the city and of its being a site of pilgrimage. These two elements are then overlaid and combined with the program to create six buildings that are entirely merged with the landscape to complete the peak of the hill that they are placed on. The building and the landscape are merged into something that is neither nor, depending always on the position of the observer. The interior of the seven buildings that have been compared to stranded whales, are articulated through a reading of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of *the smooth and the striated*,<sup>16</sup> based on two opposite forms of spaces: the smooth as nomadic, heterogeneous and haptic space; the striated as sedentary, dimensional and homogenous space. This reading created a smooth space articulated through a rhythm of striations in accordance to the programmatic organisation. Another reference to this phase is the *becoming unmotivated of the sign*, an interpretation of a distinction between *indexical* sign, that are not linguistically motivated and *iconical* and *symbolical* signs that are motivated, by the American linguist Charles Sanders Peirce. Eisenman considered that the *architectural sign* cannot be totally unmotivated which was actually his goal, and as a result he proposed the *becoming unmotivated*, that is a movement towards "unmotivation" of the subject as author and of the sign. However, the reference had no influence as a technique of writing in this last project. Could we assume that this new kind of ground-ground urban strategy does not respond to any linguistic strategy? Is the *scape* over? Is it possible that after delving into the textual space and having experienced all possible relationships of linguistic to architecture, Eisenman has left the *scape of writing*?

In his essay, *Text as Zero: Or: the Destruction of Narrative*<sup>17</sup> Eisenman states that: "The old distinction between aesthetic object (the signified), and text (the signifier) is erased; objects and texts are now equivalent: object mean and text sensate." Because reality and fiction are no longer distinguishable, the *consistency* of the *scape of writing* has changed. Eisenman has not left the *scape of writing* and the relationship of his architecture to the context of the Santiago project expresses this new understanding of linguistics. In this last phase of work Eisenman's understanding of architecture and literature have become the same.

What could correspond to this in the realm of literature? Could we not compare the unachieved *Livre* by the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé,<sup>18</sup> who was supposed to be made out of interchangeable pages as to produce each time a

16 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, the smooth and the striated, in: *Gilles Deleuze, a thousand plateaus, capitalism and schizophrenia*, translation and foreword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, orig: *Mille Plateaux*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1980

17 Peter Eisenman, *Text As Zero: Or: the Destruction of Narrative*, in: Lars Lérip, "Planned Assaults", MIT Press, 1987

18 For the experience and understanding of the livre: Jacques Scherer, *Le Livre de Mallarmé*, Éditions Gallimard, France, 1977, first published by Gallimard, 1957



Peter Eisenman, *Santiago project, Model*

different reading to Eisenman's new direction?

In contrast to Joyce's texts, where deformations and fictional context were enclosed into the book, Mallarmé's *Livre* was supposed to overcome the physicity of the book to create a new all-embracing experience. Mallarmé's *Livre* would have blurred the boundaries between the text and his outside, the same way Eisenman's project will blur the difference between the object and the landscape as subject.

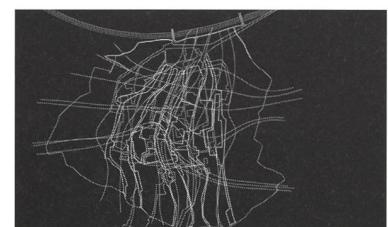
Eisenman has not yet produced a book that could be compared to *Chora L Works*, on the later experience of Santiago and other similar projects, maybe because this experience is at this point only possible in the domain of architecture, not in the domain of literature. Maybe the *Livre* has remained "undone", because of its impossibility.

For the project of Romeo and Juliet in Verona in 1985, Eisenman produced a publication made of interchangeable transparent sheets with plans and diagrams, but this form cannot be defined as literature.

Alice remains

"Wake up, Alice dear!" Said her sister: "Why, what a long sleep you've had!" In the middle of her dream-trial Alice is woken up by her sister and brought back to reality. Eisenman, unlike Alice has not left his Wonderland. The *scape of writing*, Eisenman's Wonderland, is neither architecture nor literature, but rather is made of a constant oscillation between a literal architecture and an architectural literature to the point where architecture and literature have become the same.

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Peter Eisenman, *Santiago project, Diagram*

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