

**Zeitschrift:** Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich  
**Herausgeber:** Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich  
**Band:** - (2003)  
**Heft:** 11

**Artikel:** Transcape:scenar(io) pasT; : is the scape over?  
**Autor:** Gerber, Andri  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-918873>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 02.08.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## 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

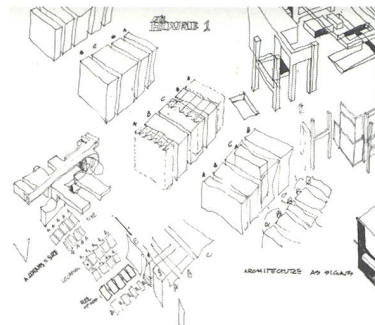
## Text-text / figure-figure

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.

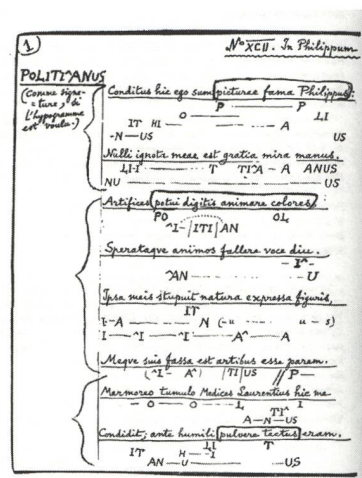
As a result of syntactical procedures, *House I – House X* are completely *contextless*. Nothing in the process of making suggested any implication or consideration to their surroundings. Ironically confirming Eisenman's approach, an Italian architecture journal once published an article on *House II* 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."

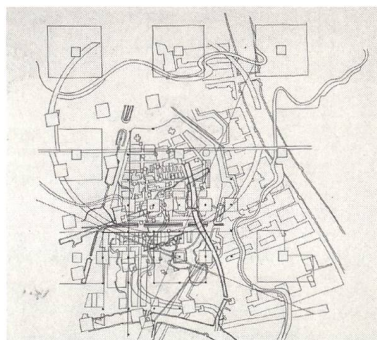
5 Peter Eisenman, *House I*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1967-68 – *House X*, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1975, unrealised



NOTES ON CONCEPTUAL ARCHITECTURE:  
Towards a Definition

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the work of the semi-linguistic or semi-linguistic as an interdisciplinary approach, see Barthes, Roland, "Introduction to Semiotics," *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 1970, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025.

Peter Eisenman, *Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition*



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

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.



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 inversed 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 chub and ducking dace. Rodiron's not your aequal! says she, leppin half the lane. *abcd*) A bell a bell on Shalldoll Steepbell, and be'll go massplon pristmoss speople, Shand praise gon ness our fayst moan *neople*, our prame *Shan-deepen*, pay name muy *fespeene*, moy nay non *Aequalllllllll*!

5. Whad slags of a loughladd would retten smuttyflesks, emp-tout old mans, melk vitious geit, scareoff jackinjills fra tiddle anding, smoothpick waste papish pastures, insides man outsiders angell, sprink dirted water around village, newses, tobaggan and sweeds, plain general kept, louden on the kirkpeal, foottreas given to malafides, outshriek hyelp hyelf nor his hair efter buggelawrs, might underhold three barnets, putzpolish crotty bottes, nightcoover all fireglims, serve's time till baass, grind-stone his knives, fullest boarded, lewd man of the method of godliness, perchance he nieows and thans sits in the spoorwaggen, X.W.C.A. on Z.W.C.U., Doorsteps, Limited, or Baywindaws Bros swobber preferred. Walther Clauser's and Sons with the H. E. Chimneys' Company to not skreve, will, on advices, be hacon or stable hand, must begripe fullstandingly ires' langurge, jublander or northquain bigger prefurred, all duties, kine rights, family fewd, outings fived, may get earnst, no get combitsch, profusional drinklords to please obtain, he is fatherlow sound-digged inmooodmined pershoon but aleconnerman, nay, that must he isn't?

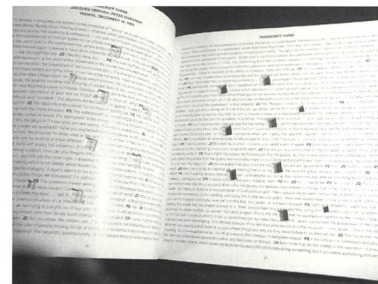
Answer: Pore ole Joe!

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 thawght 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 phwtpwhr tha Bay and who bruk the dandlaass and who seen the blackcullen jam for Tomorra's big pickneck I hope it'll pour prais the Climate of all Ireland I heard the

141

James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*



Peter Eisenman, Jacques Derrida, *Chora L Works*

<sup>12</sup> 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

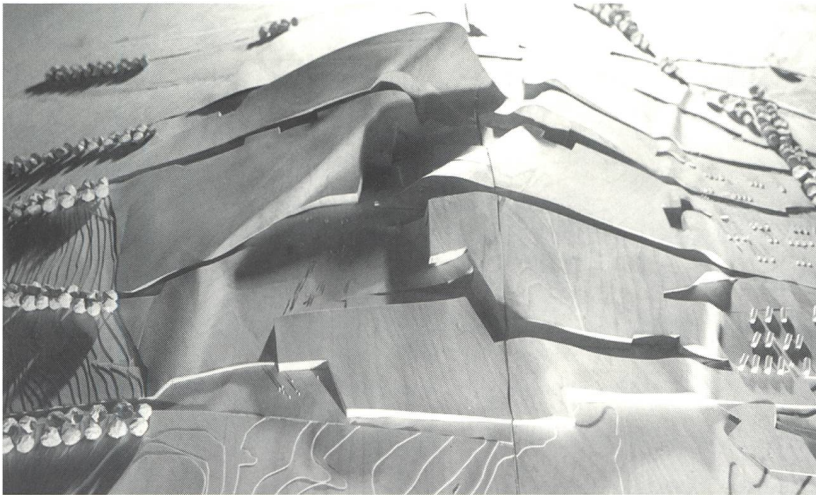
<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, edited by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leaser, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1997

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

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, edited by Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leaser, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1997







Peter Eisenman, *Santiago project*, *Model*

different reading to Eisenman's new direction?

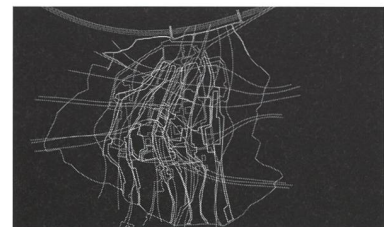
In contrast to Joyce's texts, where deformations and fictional context were enclosed into the book, Mallarmé's *Livre* was supposed to overcome the physicality of the book to create a new all-embracing experience. Mallarmé's *Livre* would have blurred the boundaries between the text and his outside, 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.



Peter Eisenman, *Santiago project*, *Diagram*

Andri Gerber is an architect and an assistant with the Chair of Architecture and Urban Design, Prof. Dr. M. Angélil, at the ETH Zurich.

The author would like to express his gratitude to Liat Uziyel and Andrew Whiteside for their proofreading and their suggestions.