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Solo House

Saida Brückner and Adrien Meuwly

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© Office KGDVS, Solo House #2

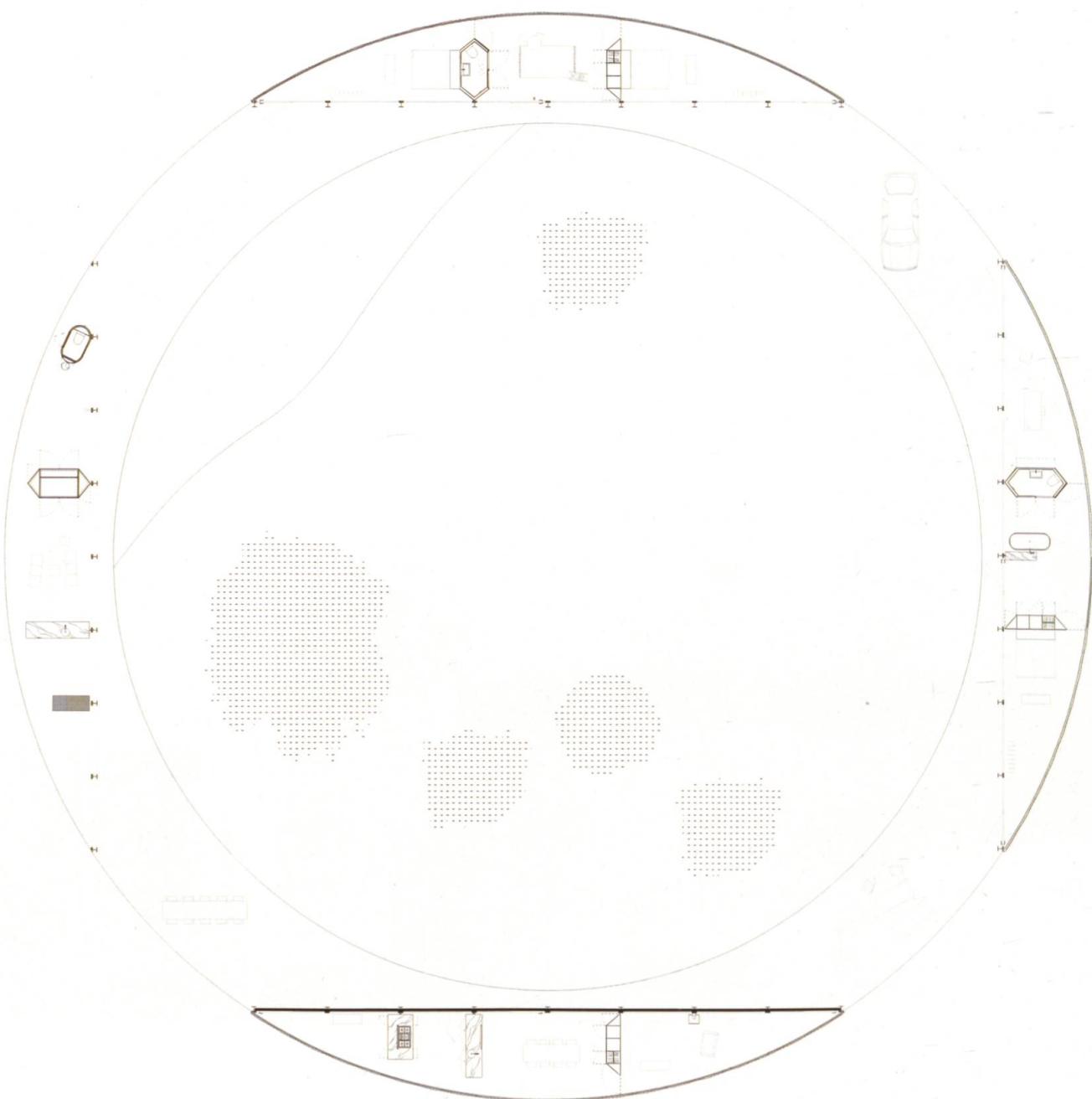
There is no inside

It is a Circle with its inside that is the outside. Viewed from outside the building is a layering of insides and outsides: the inside is followed by the outside which is inside the circle, then another inside and the outside on the other side of the building.

The concrete floor is the threshold between the house and the landscape. It demarks the house from the landscape but it does not demarcate an inside space from an outside space. When you are inside then you are outside. And when you are outside you are inside at the same time.

Four walls, placed within the circle, create two sides. Both sides are insides and outsides. They are the same. The reflections of insides and outsides are superimposed. There is no being inside and there is no being outside at any time, there is always both, the inside and the outside.

There is only one place that lets the confusion rest: the only inside is the toilet—but it is not the inside of a house but the inside of a closet.



‘go (a)round in circles’

1. Lit. to move over and over on a circular path. *The model plane went around in circles until it ran out of fuel.*
2. Fig. to act in a confused and disoriented manner. *I’ve been going around in circles all day.*
3. Fig. to keep going over the same ideas or repeating the same actions, often resulting in confusion, without reaching a satisfactory decision or conclusion. *We’re just going round in circles discussing the problem.*

(<http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/>)

The Laboratory

The Solo Houses project invites a selection of architects to design exceptional houses within a laboratory context. All profane circumstances are minimized to provide the architect with the most creative freedom possible. It is an experiment that provides an ideal context to develop new architectural ideas and to test them on an unrestricted site.

The Gallery. The Solo Houses is an on site project by the Solo Gallery, developed and curated by Christian Bourdieu. The gallery focuses on the experimental work being produced by architects. By placing architecture within the context of the art gallery, it allows it to become more autonomous in conception and production.

The Site. A remote piece of land in the region Matarrana in Spain is the site of the laboratory. Two hours from Barcelona, the untouched natural landscape offers a context in which nature is the only defining element. The Solo Houses are placed within an independent environment, untouched by man.

The Collection. Fifteen houses will make up the first architecture collection in Europe. The selection of architects focuses on renowned international architects, selected by invitation only. Each house will be placed on its own within an untouched landscape, but the collection will be a singular accumulation of inventive architectural ideas on a single piece of land. The houses will be sold individually as pieces of architecture but remain part of a complex of holiday homes that will be rented out at certain times of the year.

The context created by the Solo Houses project puts architects in a new situation in which architecture is no longer primarily a problem solving exercise. The architecture is free of the constraints imposed by established conditions. There is no client to be persuaded, no built context to consider and no important financial restrictions to accept. Rather the condition of the laboratory leading to an architecture, that has to reference back to the discipline itself. The parameters of design are limited to cultural, constructive and historical influences. This gives the chance and challenge to rethink the inherent forms, elements and uses of architecture in order to put in question traditional ways of practising architecture. The laboratory allows the freedom to experiment with something new. It can be a catalyst for a critical reflection of architecture and the architect's own work. It is research put into practice.

Walls are replaced by distance

Walls create a practically complete isolation from the outside world. Thinking about a wall, the image of a package of many layers comes to mind—the sandwich: bricks, an unknown number of plastic sheets, insulation glued on the whole, covered by a nice uniform colour. Thus, walls provide privacy to the different rooms of a house; they permit the direct juxtaposition of antagonistic activities and produce very dense living places. What is happening on the other side of the wall, even so close, remains unknown.

In the Solo House, there are no walls. The model of the house made of walls has been expended, the concentration of its different rooms distributed around an empty core. The walls have been replaced by distance. Placing the different functions of the home far away from each other produces privacy. You glimpse at the distant living room as you would glimpse at your neighbours' TV across the street to know what program they follow.

Two people on the opposite side of the house can be seen in the distance, but neither their activities nor their discussions are distinguishable. Only their strong exclamations are perceptible

through the forty meters of emptiness. These fragments of intrusion, which would be understood as disturbances through a badly insulated wall, create a tension between the parts of the home. Solo House is a series of open private spaces.

Champagne

We are strolling around in a circle, passing people sipping champagne and sitting in the sun. Others are walking around following the architects on every step with black notebooks in their hands. We observe the group that are meticulously jotting things down. It feels that the day is too sunny, the house too beautiful and the situation too exceptional to stare onto a piece of paper.

Everyone seems to know each other and yet it is a curious combination of people. There are the friends of the architects: beautiful intellectuals that came to celebrate the opening of the new building. For them it is a relaxed gathering of old and new friends, an opportunity to come together, drink champagne and talk about new projects. On the other hand there are the journalists enjoying the champagne with care, they pay attention and take notes—documenting the architectural masterpiece that was created in this far off place. Neither famous friends nor professional journalists, we are the odd ones out.

As we do not have to catch up on old stories and we do not have to report every word the architects say, we walk around the house and observe the architecture and the people. It feels as if the house was designed for precisely this situation: a collection of 50 privileged people drinking champagne in the sun.

Appetizers and small bites of food are served together with more champagne. A blond woman skips the line to go around the bar and ask for a «glass of white wine for the architect, please». Another women talks about last Saturday's dinner with «Pezo and Sofia*». Some people start lying around the pool on sun loungers designed by the architects' brother.

The more champagne we drink the more we feel part of the scenery—maybe you need a state of slight delirium to step over the threshold of the inner circle. To be part of it you need to feel part of it. The sun, the reflections, the champagne and the mise en scène of the assembly lets everyone drift away in a dreamlike befogged state.

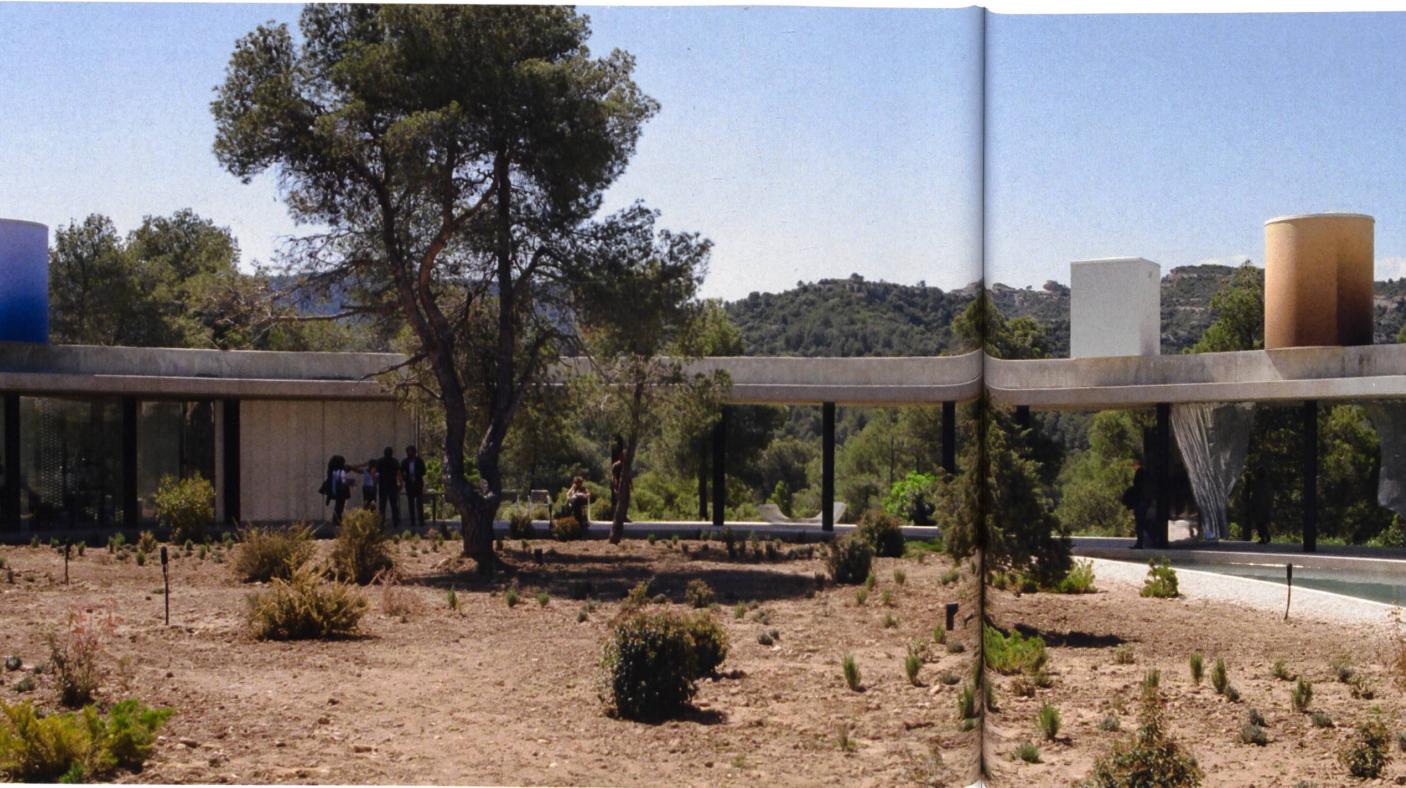
There is no outside anymore, there is just being in the moment at the place. We are not observing anymore, we are talking, laughing, discussing, drinking. We are a small community in a beautiful place. No one is coming or leaving, everyone just moves within the infinity of the house. The perfect circle has no direction and time passes without anyone noticing. The sun wanders but for us, there is no more east or west. We stay in a delirium of complete bliss. It is the epitome of hedonism. We admired the architecture when we arrived but now we live it.

Gottfried Semper visiting the Solo House

GS Foundation: check. Structure and roof: check. Even though the roof looks quite similar to the floor. What about the enclosure? (Kersten Geers goes away and comes back dragging a heavy metal panel with him.)

GS OK, fine. In the centre of the house is the fire. Where is your fire? KG Well... The house has no centre.

* von Ellrichshausen



The Solo Houses park is a remote place with a limited accommodation capacity. The gallery invites architects to rethink the model of the holiday home: a retreat away from the problems of the troubled world, an ideal place glorifying the bond between people and nature. The Solo Houses project thus finds its roots in its restrictive character. The amount of houses, as the amount of people is limited, in order for the park not to be turned into a Club Med. To stay in one of the Solo Houses is the privilege of a wealthy society.

The project brings up the recurrent question of the architect's role in society. Architecture is intrinsically a social practice; architects are responsible for the production of liveable built environments for social cohabitation. Solo Houses however is taking a distance from society. With its remoteness it is far from touching social problems.

It creates a context only for the sake of architecture. Thus, the progress it generates is exclusively architectural and will be experienced only by the small amount of its privileged inhabitants. However this context allows to produce new ideas, which are contributions to the general cultural wealth.

The question arises whether the ideal design context of Solo Houses could be taken as an example to also reflect on other programs: it has to be seen if Solo Supermarket or Solo Social Housing has any chance to exist or whether exclusivity is an inherent condition of Solo.

The Storm

September, late in the afternoon. The day has been hot. It is amazing how heavy the air feels in this region. Sitting at the swimming pool, he is reading the last chapters of his book: a holiday novel he had bought in a gas station on his way from Paris. But he is not concentrating on his reading. He appreciates the moment, that stunning silence and the sun on his skin.

A light breeze gets up and refreshes the air, blowing on the light silver curtains that are now dancing in the air. He had completely opened the sliding facade earlier in the day, hoping for this wind to come and ventilate the house. He empties his glass, drops his book on the table and jumps into the pool.

Climbing the few steps to get out of the water he realizes that the sun is now swathed in clouds. He feels a little cold but remains optimistic: the weather forecast was indicating a few drops of rain, but not before nine. But as he returns to his *chaise longue* a sudden gust of wind tips over the small table away, breaking the glass on the floor. This violent mass of air raising dust, leaves and small tree branches now crosses the entire house. A few seconds later it starts to rain. There is no time to collect the glass splinters. He rushes to the first piece of sliding façade—the one he had used as a sun shade in the afternoon—and starts closing it. He runs to the second one and drags it to the first. Only one third of these huge panels are now in place and the sky is getting darker and darker. On the horizon, thunderbolts are already dropping out of the sky.

As he arrives in his room the rainwater has already reached the bed. He steps off the floor onto the soggy earth to pull the next heavy panel. He slowly moves it to its place, barefoot, slipping in the mud. He still has to close the kitchen on the opposite side of the house, forty meters away. He wants to cross diametrically through the centre of the house, but the vegetation is definitely too dense. The wet and slippery terrazzo slows down his run along the curved way. Arriving there, the floor is covered with water, sand and leaves, but he



Photographs p. 86-88: Adrien Menjely

has no time to think: the thunderstorm is getting closer. He uses his last strength to close the panels and finally finds himself safe in the kitchen, freezing, wearing nothing but his speedo.

The Architecture of Objects

The connection between landscape and inhabitants is the strongest parameter of Office's Solo House design. The minimization of the architectural elements' physicality aims to let the architecture vanish in the surrounding nature. There are walls, columns, a floor and a roof, but they have no visual importance. The floor and the roof are two simple concrete slabs, the walls are made of glass and the columns are lost between the outside trees. The house is almost nothing.

In contrast the geometric objects staged upon the slab of the roof create a sculpture exhibition. Containing the technical devices, the sculptures objectify what is usually hidden. The technical devices are the only elements of the house that have a physical and visual mass. At the same time they are the only elements that the inhabitant does not directly interact with.

The objects on the roof are not merely a demonstration of technics. It is not simply about showing on the outside what is usually hidden inside. No ducts or ventilation shafts are exposed. The technical elements were rather given abstract geometric shapes that are designed as all the other elements in the house. They become thus an even more important part of the architecture. The objects become stylistic devices that are the only volumetrically defining parameters. The architecture is no longer an architecture of elements, but an architecture of objects.

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