



# In response to the specific. The Space Between in Alison and Peter Smithson

## En respuesta a lo específico. El Espacio Intermedio en Alison y Peter Smithson

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**ABSTRACT** Some terms, such as *neighbourhood*, *doorstep philosophy*, or *space between*, take on particular significance in the work of Alison and Peter Smithson. The latter, especially, is a recurring term in their writings and works. Exploring the origins of their interest in this concept, the influence of Nigel Henderson and his impact on the Team X, as well as their reflections on the quality of the space between, based on the paintings of Pieter de Hooch, is the main aim of this writing. It is therefore proposed to explore some of the approaches that invite us to unravel the concept: through the void, the sky, the layers and lattices, the trees, we can observe how the space between enriches Smithsons' architecture in order to serve each person and each place precisely and, in this way, offer answers to the specific; an approach that is, ultimately, at the origin of all their reflections.

**RESUMEN** Algunos términos como *neighbourhood*, *doorstep philosophy* o *space between*, cobran especial importancia en la obra de Alison y Peter Smithson. Especialmente el último es un término recurrente en sus escritos y trabajos. Explorar el origen de su interés por este concepto, la influencia de Nigel Henderson y su repercusión en el Team X, así como sus consideraciones sobre la cualidad del espacio intermedio a partir de las pinturas de Pieter de Hooch, es el objetivo principal de este escrito. Se propone así ahondar en algunas aproximaciones que invitan a desentrañar el concepto: a través del vacío, del cielo, de los estratos y entramados, de los árboles, podemos observar como el *space between* enriquece la arquitectura de los Smithson para atender a cada persona y lugar de forma precisa y, de esta manera, ofrecer respuestas a lo específico; un planteamiento que está, en definitiva, en el origen de todas sus reflexiones.

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Figure 1: Nigel, Judith, and Drusilla Henderson, in the garden of their house in Bethnal Green, at Chisenhale Road No. 46, 1952 / Nigel Henderson: Wall, McCullum Road, 1949 / Nigel Henderson: Gillian Alexander jumping, Chisenhale Road, 1951. V. Walsh (2001) © The Henderson State

## 1. Introduction

It is essential to consider the context from which the work of Alison and Peter Smithson emerges, in order to understand the importance that concepts such as "neighbourhood," "doorstep philosophy," and "space between" have in their works. The Second World War had left European nations in a state of great economic precarity, with Britain particularly notable for its climate of absolute austerity, marked by high taxes and rationing that persisted until July 1954.

A close friend of the Smithsons, photographer Nigel Henderson, taught them to observe the reality of this severe post-war period with attentive eyes and would notably influence their inclination to attend to "the specific." Peter Smithson had met sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi in 1951 at the Central School of Arts & Crafts, where Paolozzi introduced him to Henderson, who also taught there. Alison and Peter Smithson, along with Paolozzi and Henderson, would become part of the Independent Group.

Nigel Henderson temporarily moved with his family to the working-class neighbourhood of Bethnal Green, as his wife, Judith Henderson, was conducting a sociological study of the neighbourhood as part of Mass Observation's "Discover Your Neighbour" project. The project involved observing the daily lives of the neighbourhood residents up close (in this case, the Samuels family). It was a kind of urban-scale "social espionage" (Fernández, 2014, p. 401). Nigel, for his part, took the opportunity to photograph the streets and its people "as he found them." In this way, Nigel introduced the Smithsons to the rich concept of "As Found" (Smithson & Smithson, 1990, p. 201). The vitality of the streets, which Henderson sought to capture, was primarily evident in the photographs aimed at

children, taken from the window of his house, often with the children completely unaware of the camera and absorbed in their improvised play. Other photographs were taken from the steps leading to his house, from the doorstep. Through all of this, what Nigel conveyed was "life" (Figure 1).

For this reason, Henderson took his friends Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison, and Peter Smithson for walks through the streets of the East End, to sensitize them to this revitalizing experience. As Peter remarked about a photograph taken on McCullum Road: "A walk with Nigel is to see the inanimate as animate; Nigel has the strange habit of opening the eyes of others so they may see" (Wals, 2001, p. 50). This underscores the impact that those walks through the East End had on the Smithsons: Henderson had presented them with the opportunity to witness, firsthand, the self-sufficiency and vitality of a community whose daily life of work, shopping, and socialization took place within a confined network of streets. Recognizing the value of this social cohesion, the Smithsons considered it necessary to reformulate urban planning so that the concept of the street would take a prominent place.

Building on this initial influence of Nigel Henderson, of learning to look at the specific, the essay aims to delve into the concept of intermediate space in the architecture of Alison and Peter Smithson, following some related ideas and exploring elements of their work that invite such an approach.

Figure 1b: Nigel Henderson: Gillian Alexander saltando, Chisenhale Road, 1951. V. Walsh (2001) © The Henderson State





## 2. Method

It is no coincidence that the third monographic volume by the Smithsons, following "The Charged Void: Architecture" and "The Charged Void: Urbanism," edited by Peter Smithson in 2001 and 2005 respectively, is titled "The Space Between." This latter volume, edited in 2017 by Max Risselada, concludes the trilogy and highlights the importance that this concept held for the authors. As stated in the introduction of that publication, it is something difficult to describe, record, and understand. Methodologically, in order to unravel its meanings, terms such as "neighbourhood" or "threshold" have been rescued from their writings and projects, terms that invite the authors to delve into the spatial qualities of the intermediate space, analysing the context from which they arise. Afterward, some excerpts from the texts referring to the space between are studied and presented, either directly or through some prominent elements in their work: emptiness, sky, strata and frameworks, and trees. Additionally, case studies are employed to illustrate how the space between manifests in each of them, to finally verify, in the conclusions, how it constitutes something essential in their work, which is somehow present from the beginning.

## 3. Attention to the specific and the doorstep

In July 1953, at the IX meeting of CIAM, the Smithsons presented Nigel Henderson's photographs depicting street life in Bethnal Green. They argued that the true urban solution lies in human association, as opposed to the segregation implied by the Athens Charter (Smithson & Smithson, 2005). The Smithsons' CIAM Grille focused on the theme of "urban reidentification," and in contrast to the four zones of single-use, their template suggested interconnections between four scales of habitation: urban housing, street, district, and city (Figure 2). To prevent the photographs of East End communities from appearing mere historicism, the Smithsons emphasized the need to create modern equivalents. Hence, they cited their famous street decks, created for the Golden Lane Project, explaining that, rather than a narrow corridor for access to housing (alluding to Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation), the street deck should be wide enough for neighbours to meet and children to play within view from the house. Thus, what the Smithsons define here as "doorstep philosophy" is that space of relationship at the entrance to the home that provides tranquillity for children's play, akin to what Nigel had captured in his photographs taken from the doorstep of his home. The street decks exemplified the pursuit of this space. The platforms become a social entity and ultimately transform into places with their "own identity" for housing (Vidotto, 1997).

With Henderson's photographs, they showcased the type of social interaction that they would defend from that moment onward: concepts such as improvisation, invention, urban choreography, territorial flexibility, improvised sociability, and so on. Children's play constitutes the best example to represent "vital human associations" and the "intangible, immeasurable, inexpressible relationships" of Team X (Woods, 1970, p. 8); to encapsulate the ethics and moral responsibility that its members want to adopt. As Peter explained:

Of course, those who know anything about the 'shift to the specific' that occurred in the manifestos and works of young architects in the 1950s will already be aware of how both Nigel and his wife Judith, unknowingly, were part of that shift... (Wals, 2001, p. 150).

With the intention of surpassing traditional concepts while also revising a large portion of rationalist urbanism principles, they created five new urban concepts, which were presented at the CIAM X in 1956: identity, models of association, growth model, cluster, and mobility. Influenced by Patrick Geddes (Lewis, 1970), they defined four groups within the scale of association: isolated housing, village, town, and metropolis. However, these were general ideas that needed to be specified. The Smithsons devised and subjected to debate a grid with different models of housing aggregation, corresponding to isolated houses, villages, towns, cities, and metropolises. Starting from references, ideograms were presented as "steps towards formal conception" (Vidotto, 1997, p. 50), and they were subsequently developed slowly until they "became specific in each situation" (Vidotto, 1997, p. 14).

In all the panels, only one image was repeated: a painting of a Dutch courtyard (Figure 3). It appeared in the first exhibition panel as a reference for isolated housing. They explained:





Figure 2: Urban Re-Identification Grille. Alison and Peter Smithson, IX CIAM, 1953. M. Risselada and D. Van der Heuvel (2005)

The Dutch painting is significant because it portrays two types of 'extension of housing' to the outside: that of work and that of recreation. It shows the good life - possible for any bourgeois family. Its equivalent can be found in American advertisements (Van der Heuvel and Risselada, 2004, p. 68).

The painting was shown a second time as a reference for the Close Houses, the housing model presented for the city, in addition to two examples of linear groupings (some shops in the Crimean War and some wells in the Sahara).

The image corresponds to a painting by Pieter de Hooch, "Woman and her Maid in a Courtyard," created by the Dutch painter in Delft in 1660 (Figure 3). It depicts a scene of domestic life filled with a white, static light that imbues the image with an atmosphere of tranquillity. In the painting, we can see two women absorbed in their daily tasks. Additionally, we see an open door from the garden to the outside, with a small pathway along which a gentleman is walking. The courtyard depicted in the painting is the first in a series of very similar spaces, and in this sense, it connects well with the proposed idea for the Close Houses (Fernández, 2013). These houses were named "To be close" due to the proximity between the houses arranged along a pedestrian spine, interior and transversal to the residential fabric, which receives light from above. The Smithsons drew tall walls enclosing the garden with arrows emanating from them, pointing towards the sky.

pedestrian walkway, from which, as in the Dutch painting, the various courtyards on which the houses extend can be observed. The Smithsons speak of "neighbourhood" in them (Figure 4).

The four friends who had walked hand in hand with the photographer through the streets of Bethnal Green sat, on the occasion of the This is Tomorrow exhibition, in the middle of the street, in front of the architects residence, at 46 Limerston Street in Chelsea, creating a photograph that was "very Eames" (Smithson & Smithson, 2001, p. 74). They thus advocated for the important role of "street sociology" for the future, and the relevance of doorstep philosophy. But while in the early years the Smithsons primarily spoke of that philosophy of the threshold or doorstep philosophy, in their later works they focused their attention on what they define as the intermediate space, the space between.

■ With the expression "very Eames," the Smithsons referred to the way the Eames composed, precisely and thoughtfully, even though at times it might not seem so. Photographs that denoted the importance and beauty of the everyday.

■ "The work done by Judith Henderson in East End leads to the sociology that will emerge from the streets themselves." See the foreword by Peter Smithson in: Walsh, V. (2001). Nigel Henderson: Parallel of life and art (pp. 150-151). Thames and Hudson.

Throughout the 1950s, architects focused on the importance of re-establishing a sense of identity. They believed it could be achieved through the possession of a small piece of territory, and emphasized, an inviolable territory: "It is this spatial extension of the home into the public domain that should be able to be felt, at least emotionally, as a possession of the home, or better, physically taken by the home occupants, the so-called doorstep philosophy" (Smithson & Smithson, 1982, p. 28). Thus, the Close Houses share that covered



Figure 3a & 3b: Panels 1 of references for the proposals of isolated housing (Isolate) and city houses (Close Houses) within the "valley section," presented by the Smithsons at CIAM X, 1956. D. Van den Heuvel and M. Risselada (2004) / National Gallery, London





Figure 3c: Pieter de Hooch, Woman and her Maid in a Courtyard, 1660. D. Van den Heuvel and M. Risselada (2004) / National Gallery, London



## 4. Space Between

The space between, as a space that reconciles the dichotomy of interior and exterior, became a topic of discussion among members of Team X, especially between the Smithsons and Aldo van Eyck. As Max Risselada explains, the former refer to the quality of the intermediate space; the latter emphasizes its form<sup>3</sup>. This difference in approaches can be seen in the Team X meeting in Rotterdam on April 7, 1974, which began with an analysis of the Terneuzen Town Hall, a work by Van der Broek and Bakema (1963-1972). In this debate, Aldo van Eyck speaks of the interior and exterior linked to geometry: "the concavity generates an interior space, not suitable for creating an exterior" (in Smithson, 1991, p. 116), referring to his own architectural language. Peter Smithson argues that the interior-exterior relationship should not be conditioned by formal or geometrical terms. "The air can be a square," he and Bakema expressed somewhat ironically. Ultimately, Pieter de Hooch's painting seemed to calm that debate: Pieter de Hooch's work expressed the quality of the space between. Van Eyck emphasized: "there is almost no difference: it's all exterior, all interior. It's incredible" (in Smithson, 1991, p. 116).

The importance of that debate lay in the Smithsons' defence that the form of the space between cannot be defined in advance but must emerge as a result of the location of the built form. Peter offered this beautiful explanation of the concept:

Where there is a beach with rocks protruding from the sand, at low tide, small pools remain in certain places where the rocks gather. This is how our urbanism works; the formation of buildings entails a pooling of the intermediate space. And, as in the pools between the rocks, what is within that intermediate space appears extremely alive (...) The pooling has not been sought in a totally conscious way. It is largely

spontaneous, a result of observation and invention based on the forms of the terrain, the boundaries, and the path of the sun during the working day (Smithson, 2004, p. 95).

The space between is also, for the Smithsons, the space that allows speculation, conjecture, and meditation (Smithson & Smithson, 2017, p. 260). The distance between their projects and texts allows the same writing to permit different readings, just as the same space can be inhabited in different ways. Therefore, it seems pertinent to attempt to establish the meaning of the space between based on some elements that are repeated in their works and texts, related to the intermediate space.

### 4.1. Void

In the consideration of the void by the Smithsons, one can identify the existentialist mark of Martin Heidegger (Smithson, 2004), who delivered a lecture in Bremen in December 1949, in the series called "A Look at What Is," under the title of "The Thing":

(...) What is a thing? (...) A thing is the pitcher. What is the pitcher? We say: a vessel; something that holds within itself something distinct from it (p. 144).

(...) The "thingness" of the vessel does not at all rest on the material from which it is made, but on the void, it contains (p. 147).

(...) How does the void of the pitcher contain? It contains by taking in what is poured into it. It contains by retaining what it has received (...) The void contains in a twofold manner: by taking and by retaining (...) But this unity is determined by the pouring out, which is what the pitcher as pitcher is destined for. The twofold containing of the void rests on the pouring out (...) (Heidegger, 1994, p. 149).

<sup>3</sup>Lecture given by Max Risselada, following the exhibition: "Alison & Peter Smithson. From the House of the Future to the House of Today," Seville, November 26, 2006.

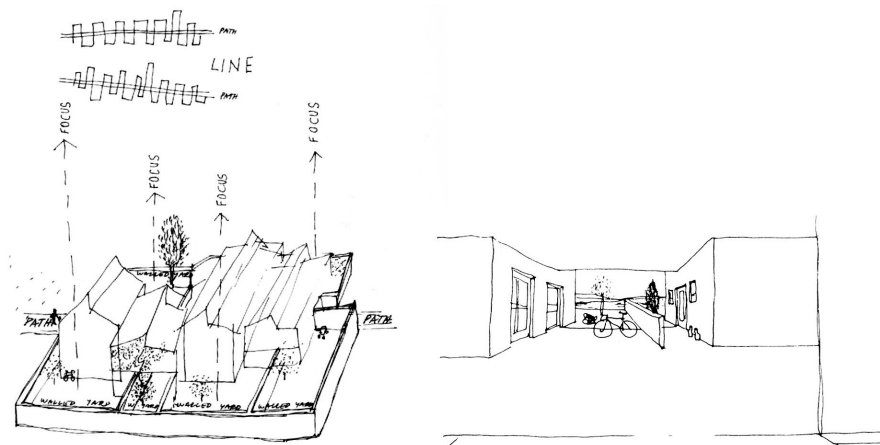


Figure 4: Close Houses, 1955-1956. Peter Smithson: Diagram of "Vertical Tube of Private Pure Air" / Alison Smithson: View from the covered pedestrian walkway. Smithson & Smithson (2001, 1982)



Figure 5: Alison and Peter Smithson. Economist Building Plaza (Michael Carapetian, 1964). Smithson & Smithson (2001)

In a particularly representative manner, the void takes centre stage in the proposal by the Smithsons for the Economist. The project stemmed from the magazine's initiative to expand its headquarters on the central London Street of St. James. It was a challenging site, in an area where architecture and social values were extremely conservative. The client persuaded the Boodles Club to join the group, thus allowing for a larger intervention area, almost square in shape. One of the great successes of this project, as expressed by Gordon Cullen, lay in the disintegration: "This process of disintegrating into fragments and assembling with skill and foresight is at the root of all creative planning (...). The only way we can humanize the environment is to discover how it is fragmented" (Cullen, 1968, p. 121).

The result was an asymmetrical composition that includes three separate buildings of different heights, in addition to the Boodle's Club, to accommodate different functions: the tower housing the Economist's offices, with fourteen floors; the bank building facing St. James Street, with four floors; the residential tower, with seven floors; and the observation deck of the Boodle's Club, erected as part of the club's ladies' annex.

One of the primary motivations for responding with these heights was the need to respect the scale and form of St. James Street, an 18th-century street, which the architects resolved masterfully. The differences in height and distribution allowed the bank, with its lower

height, to have its front directly facing this street, acting as a perfect mediator between the 18th-century façade of the Boodles Club by Fey and the more monumental and neoclassical layout of the Brooks's Club located opposite. This fragmentation also allowed for symbolism through the office tower, significantly delaying its view from the main street but configuring a landmark from certain points in the city. Accompanying the progressive reduction in height, the densification of vertical divisions in the composition of the façades corresponded to the urban hierarchy, use, and size of the different buildings. The particular chamfered corners reduced the apparent volume of the buildings and opened up the possibility for long views outward and cross views between the buildings themselves, as perceived in the reflections. At the same time, as Peter Smithson emphasized, "the chamfers enhance greater entry of light into the interior and the lower pedestrian space" (Smithson & Smithson, 2017, p.11).

If the disintegration into volumes was an undeniable success in the project, so too was the decision to create an elevated pedestrian level, separated from vehicular traffic. Thus, the three buildings are grouped around this tranquil space, slightly raised above the surrounding streets, a place in the midst of the city that encourages encounters. It is a space that is both exterior and interior at the same time, a threshold space.

In this project, it is perfectly evident that this empty space, as Peter Smithson asserted, is not an a priori void but a result of the location of the built form. However, by considering, using, and inhabiting the space between, they achieve the essence of the void with all the beauty and ambiguity that the term possesses. Not by chance, the Smithsons chose the term "The Charged Void" for the first two volumes of their monographs and the suggestive contrasted photographs by Michael Carapetian of this singular inhabited space (Figure 5).

Thus, the porticos, the ground floors with glass, and the interior continuity of the plaza's pavement enhance the effect of a fluid and intense space, anchored by the blind wall of the Boodle's Club. The perception of scale continuously varies as we move through the plaza, which never seems constrained to maintain its connections with the surrounding urban space. Sometimes, the opening towards the exterior is minimal, but sufficient to be part of the whole. The spatial sequences generated recall the Dutch paintings of Pieter de Hoogh, which the architects had used to explain the spatial quality of the space between. The Smithsons would thus define the elevated plaza of the Economist as:

The plaza layout extending in front of the Economist building offers a pedestrian space prior to the entrance to recompose sensitivities, a space to prepare for entering the building to work or visit. The city remains beyond the boundaries of the site, but an intermediate space is provided for it (Vidotto, 1997, p. 104).

## 4.2. Sky

The images presented by the Smithsons in 1956 for the Close-Houses showed a lateral closure and an arrow emerging from the interior courtyard directed towards the sky. The House of the Future, using a similar scheme, seemed to represent the reconciliation of polarities: architecture-landscape; fragment-unity; limited-infinite; exterior-interior. Its scheme resembles a camera focusing on the sky (Fernández, 2013). The Smithsons also contemplate the sky in relation to the concept of the space between.

The proposal presented for the primary school competition in Wokingham originated from a horseshoe-shaped scheme, where the classroom pavilions and play areas opened onto the garden. The Smithsons emphasized about this proposal: "it is 'introverted' (...) but it has wide views of the sky, trees, and sun (...) it has a strong identity" (Vidotto, 1997, p. 74).

The project was the result of their reflections on the "pavilion and the route." On one hand, the classrooms, the pavilions, are aluminium and glass cubes where children are in visual contact with the passage of time, with the weather, and the seasons. On the other hand, the route, the streets or spaces of activities, which connect the pavilions, are laterally closed by walls and overhead by a transparent cover. They have, therefore, the "sky as a ceiling" (Smithson and Smithson, 2001, p. 59). Alison's drawing of this space only shows a fragment. It focuses on that sky covering the space. Through the glass, we see birds, tree branches, and raindrops falling from a black cloud, which contrasts with the other white clouds drawn in the foreground (Figure 6). The drawing contains, in its simplicity, the passage of time narrated through the sky and its elements. It presents "the sky in continuous change" (Vidotto, 1997, p. 34).

The space between speaks to the sky..  
the space between fills that sky with meaning.  
The sky has changed. The response to it, therefore, changes.  
(Smithson and Smithson, 2005, p. 12).

## 4.3. Strata and frameworks

The first time the Smithsons used the term "space between" was in relation to Louis Kahn's Da Vore house, in an article titled "Kahn's Barn" (Figure 7). In it, they say:

The most mysterious and dense architectural forms are those that capture empty air. The fairy ring, Stonehenge, the vertical columns of the temple whose cellar walls have disappeared, the chimneys of English Renaissance, the empty barn, the Kahn house of square brick columns.. these forms are of double effect, they concentrate inwardly, radiate dynamism (energy/force) outwardly (...) But why do we see Kahn's house of brick columns as a barn?



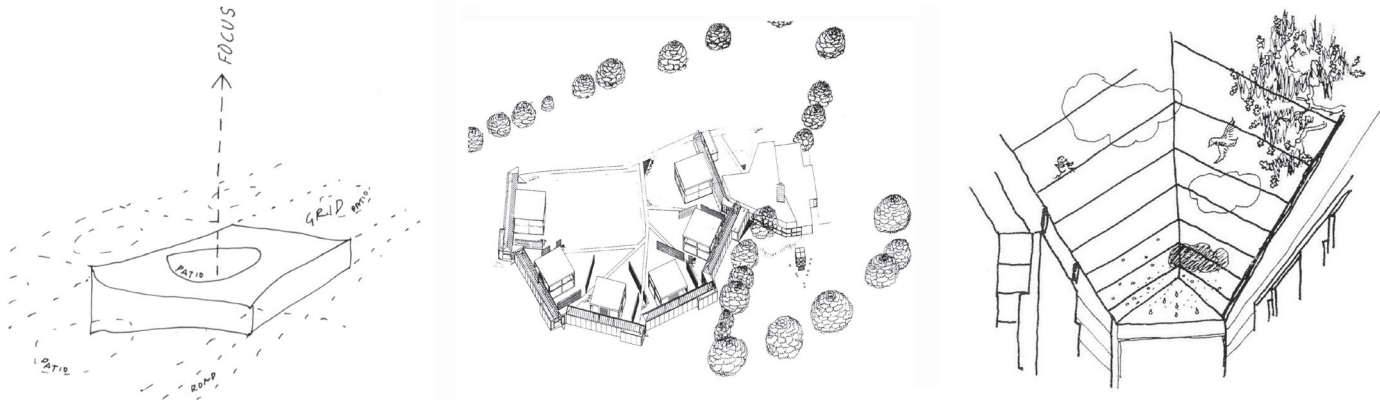


Figure 6: Alison and Peter Smithson: diagram of the “vertical tube of pure private air,” from the House of the Future. 1955-1956/ Alison and Peter Smithson: Wokingham Elementary School. 1958. Alison Smithson: Axonometric drawing made in 1958, to which trees were added in 1987, and “sketch of the glass roof of the ‘class-street’, with two birds, one flying, the other perching,” 1958. Smithson & Smithson (1982, 2001)

Why did it seem so moving to us when it had barely been drawn (and not just to us)? Did we feel it as a temple?... the temple as empty?... the empty as a barn? ... a barn as a tree? The Kahn house of brick columns was a brutalist space for the intellect; it was not a barn, it was not a temple, it was free from the seasonal wheel, free from gods or rituals. A frame in which a contemplative owner could comfortably camp and appreciate nature, and by moving their screens see the stars or the moon as a spectacle without becoming a spectacle themselves for another (Smithson and Smithson, 2017, p. 29).

That concept of structure that “captures empty air,” and constitutes a new layer that serves as a framework and resolves the dichotomy between interior and exterior, will also be used by the Smithsons during that time. In the 1970s, the Smithsons’ interest and knowledge of climate and seasonal change had intensified, as well as their fascination with dressing architecture through the art of inhabiting, using ephemeral layers that would eventually become permanent in the so-called “framework architecture” (Vidotto and González, 2001). The lattices overlap the buildings, creating suggestive visual relationships with the surroundings, based on their delineation into geometric fragments. Also, from reflections. These are projects that “deal with layers, of material and space that, together, create places for light, shadow, air, and living” (Smithson, 2004, p. 93).

The lattice will feature prominently in many of the Smithsons’ works. With it, they referred to constructions with wooden bracing from ancient medieval cities. Beneath these layer and lattice projects, the idea of protection also underlies. Thus, used in Oxford for the first time, at St Hilda’s College, the lattice emerges as “an external protection for the women’s college” (Vidotto and González, 2001, p. 20), like a sort of *yashmak*<sup>1</sup>.

The building does not occupy the centre of the place but a secluded spot, to respect the preexisting location. The proximity of “a beautiful and pale beech tree”

reinforces the protection while mixing its branches with the lattice, both in reality and in the reflections that are drawn on the glass. Thus, the lattice generates a space and constitutes “a bridge element that allows integration with the tree window,” referencing a poem by Robert Frost, (Fernández and Jiménez, 2020, p. 81), “the building allows the leaves to pass between the branches and the air between them” (Smithson and Smithson, 2017, p. 201) (Figure 8).

Although created for this building, the words “layers and lattices” will come to acquire diverse meanings, often in direct relation to the trees. In this sense, the project developed for the Joseph Lucas Headquarters in 1974, in Shirley, serves as an example: a deliberately optical lattice of linear pieces, with which the authors generate strata between which there is room for the intermediate space: a space for the art of inhabiting, for illusion and activity. The offices unfold in a fragmented manner in pavilions that assume, with their intricate geometry, the positions of the existing large trees. The architecture recedes and staggers as “if majestically dancing with the trees” (Vidotto, 1997, p. 144), ensuring connection with the place. The pavilions are cohesive through the “route” and disperse in the territory, aiming to appropriate the trees. They disappear optically behind the lattices that configure them. The project draws from the native landscape, from the links between architecture and nature typical of picturesque. It also draws from certain personal references of the Smithsons during those years, such as the Katsura Villa (1616-1660) they visited in 1960, “in relation to the ground plan” (Casino, 2017, p. 351) and especially in the occupation of the intermediate space: that sequential organization of traditional architecture through the generation of spaces that are simultaneously interior and exterior. Alison and Peter Smithson (2017) explain:

<sup>1</sup> The *yashmak* is a veil that covers the face but not the eyes of Muslim women, and it served as inspiration for the Smithsons after their trip to Tunisia in the summer of 1968 (Vidotto and González, 2001, p. 20).

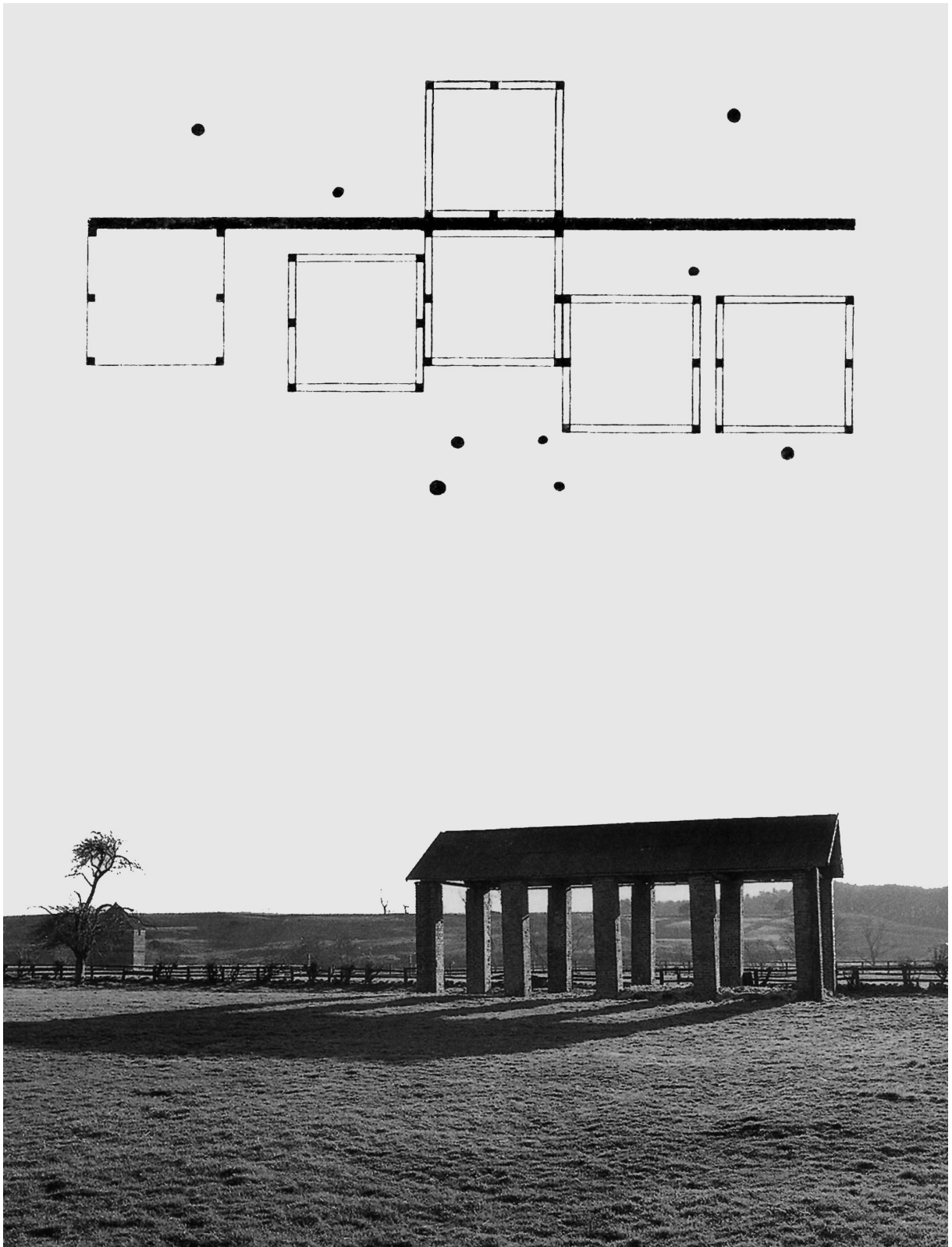


Figure 7: Louis Kahn: De Vore House, Springfield, Pennsylvania, 1954 / Barn in Low Middleton, County Durham (Peter Smithson, 1974). Smithson Smithson (2017)

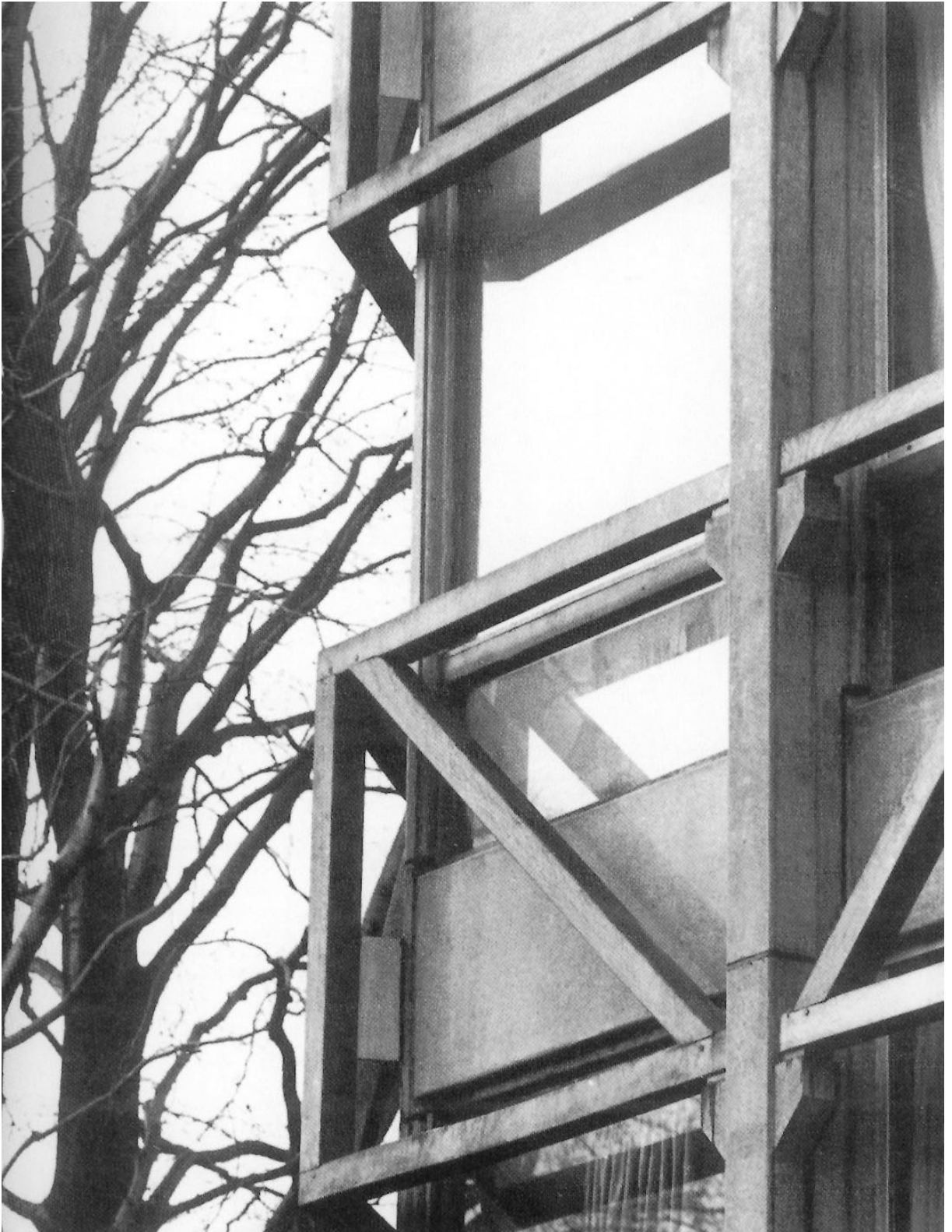


Figure 8: Alison and Peter Smithson. St. Hilda's College, 1967-1970. Garden Building, Oxford. Southwest corner with the beech tree. Smithson & Smithson (2001)



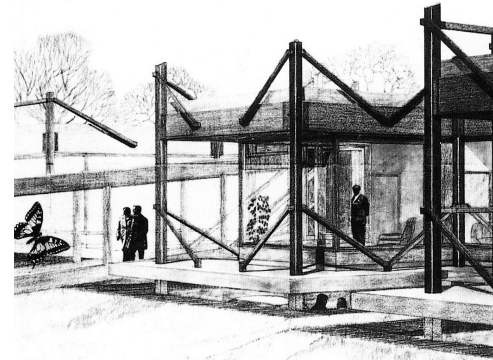
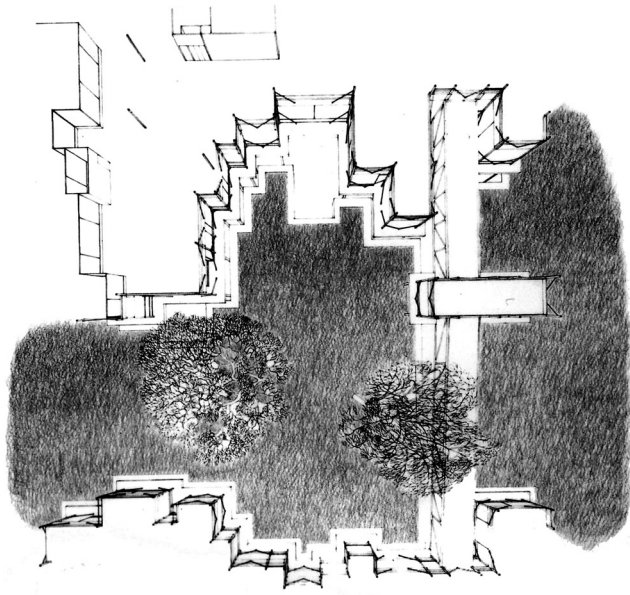


Figure 9a: Joseph Lucas Headquarters, Shirley (1973-1974). Drawing of the intermediate space between the pavilions (Alison Smithson and Lorenzo Wong) / Drawing of the lattice structure, "Layers of Lattice structure" (William Harrison, 1974). Smithson & Smithson (2001, 2017)

In Japan, objects in the void are deliberately separated, solely intended for shrines and temples (...) for housing complexes, even for those as large as the Imperial Palace in Kyoto, there is continuous space. The buildings have been deliberately distributed to modulate the intermediate space - the exterior intermediate space becomes spatially recognizable, organized like the interior space of the buildings (p. 23).

"Thus, on that trip to Japan, the architect would photograph Alison Smithson in Kyoto and underscore the assimilated concept by writing in the photo caption "outside-inside, inside-outside, Kyoto. Alison Smithson in the space between"" (Smithson, 2017, p. 25) (Figure 9).

#### 4.4. The trees

In 1947, Peter Smithson embarked on a trip with Ronald Simpson to Scandinavia, before completing his studies, with the intention of studying the work of Asplund. However, the true discovery of that trip was the artificial landscapes of Lewerentz at the Malmö Cemetery. Subsequently, in 1980, Peter returned with Alison to visit Lewerentz's work, paying special attention to the columns and trees of his Resurrection Chapel. They referred to his language as "the growth and the built", explaining: "a forest of truncated column trunks, some still growing, some turning into buildings (...). The light varies as we move through and around this part-built, part-forest-still-growing" (Smithson and Smithson, 2017, p. 121).

In their later lattice works, the tree itself becomes the silent material with which to build architecture. "Space is not only protected by it, but shaped by it" (Fernández and Jiménez, 2020, p. 80). The German designer and architect Stefan Weberka participated in the meetings of Team X during the 1960s and 1970s. There, he befriended the Smithsons and introduced them to Axel Bruchhäuser, an important patron of furniture and architecture, who commissioned several works from them during the 1990s. In these works, they "explored a whole new way of making" (Smithson, 2004, p. 46), a language that Peter confesses was initiated by Alison and later he tried to develop.

This language was experimented with over sixteen years (1986-2002) in the Hexenhouse, where they developed a series of interventions aimed at improving the relationship of the architecture with the environment in which it was inserted. It was "a house in the style of Hansel and Gretel" hidden among the trees, on a hillside near the Baroque city of Bad Karlshafen, allowing views of the Weser River at one of its bends (Smithson and Smithson, 2001, p. 552). It was a simple rectangular building with a solid stone base, topped by a steeply pitched gable roof and two conventional timber-framed facades.

To meet Axel's desire to experience the environment from the living room, they began by developing a porch on the southwest side of the house, replacing the existing gap, creating a transitional space that would allow for different uses. The variety of frames used is striking: the two original doors, included as found, obscured the view with their dense frames, contrasting with the large glass



Figure 9b: "Outside-Inside, inside-outside, Kyoto. Alison Smithson in the space between" (Peter Smithson, 1960). Smithson & Smithson (2001, 2017)

panels that intensified the perception of the river and with the new wooden structure, resolved as if it were "a built part of the forest" (Vidotto, 1997, p. 204). In this way, the porch extended the lifestyle of the two inhabitants to the outside, accommodating it to the rhythm of the seasons:

Whether the trees and the porch are without leaves, or the trees and the porch with the leaf pattern; it is a bright place when there is snow, when there is sun; a place of connection when there is rain, when there is wind (Smithson and Smithson, 2001, p. 552).

Thus, aiming to enhance that harmony with the surroundings, many other interventions followed the development of this porch, adding new layers of air. In 1989, they designed the riverside window, cantilevered, at the boundary between interior and exterior, creating a new stratum whose stepped appearance formed a comfortable niche with raised flooring and two side seats at two different heights, so that "Axel and his cat could meet eye to eye" (Van den Heuvel and Risselada, 2007, p. 260). Later, in 1998, the entrance porch was executed, once again providing a transitional space that engaged with the surrounding landscape and, in its formalization, recalled tree trunks with branches around them.

Later, the initial porch was extended from three of the old gaps, forming a true veranda that presents in its trellises a new skin for the solid pre-existing wall (Figure 10a y 10b). Additionally, Axel's bedroom bay window was added on the upper floor, with joinery that echoed the interior lattices of closets and partitions (Smithson and

Unglaub, 1999). These multiple extensions towards the exterior can be perceived as a fusion between German and English romantic traditions: "from the solitary figure contemplating nature in depth, to that of architecture as an intermediary between man and nature" (Crisson, 2018, p. 110).

In addition to these interventions in the perimeter of the house, a series of interior "holes" were executed to create vertical and lateral connections, introducing new links between spaces that also extended towards the exterior, enriching themselves with a light nuanced by layers, and seeking the quality of the intermediate space that the Dutch painting of Pieter de Hoogh had taught them.

Various pavilions were also developed to further extend the living space into the forest. The first, the Hexebesenraum, built in 1996 on the lower part of the slope, referenced the local observatories of the area, rising on large wooden piles. An open walkway starting from the first floor gives access to this small room among the trees, which hosts Axel in search of intimacy and peace. The volume openly allows views of the river, but also partially opens in its floor, ceiling, and wall, creating in its reflections and transparencies a unique intermediate space. A year later, Peter built the Tea Pavilion in the lower part of the site. Using a wooden structure and a sloping thatched roof with a central opening, he created a simple space of attractive ambiguity that seems to allude to Kahn's "barn-temple." Finally, in 2001, he erected the Lighthouse Pavilion, which was reached from the house by a walkway that

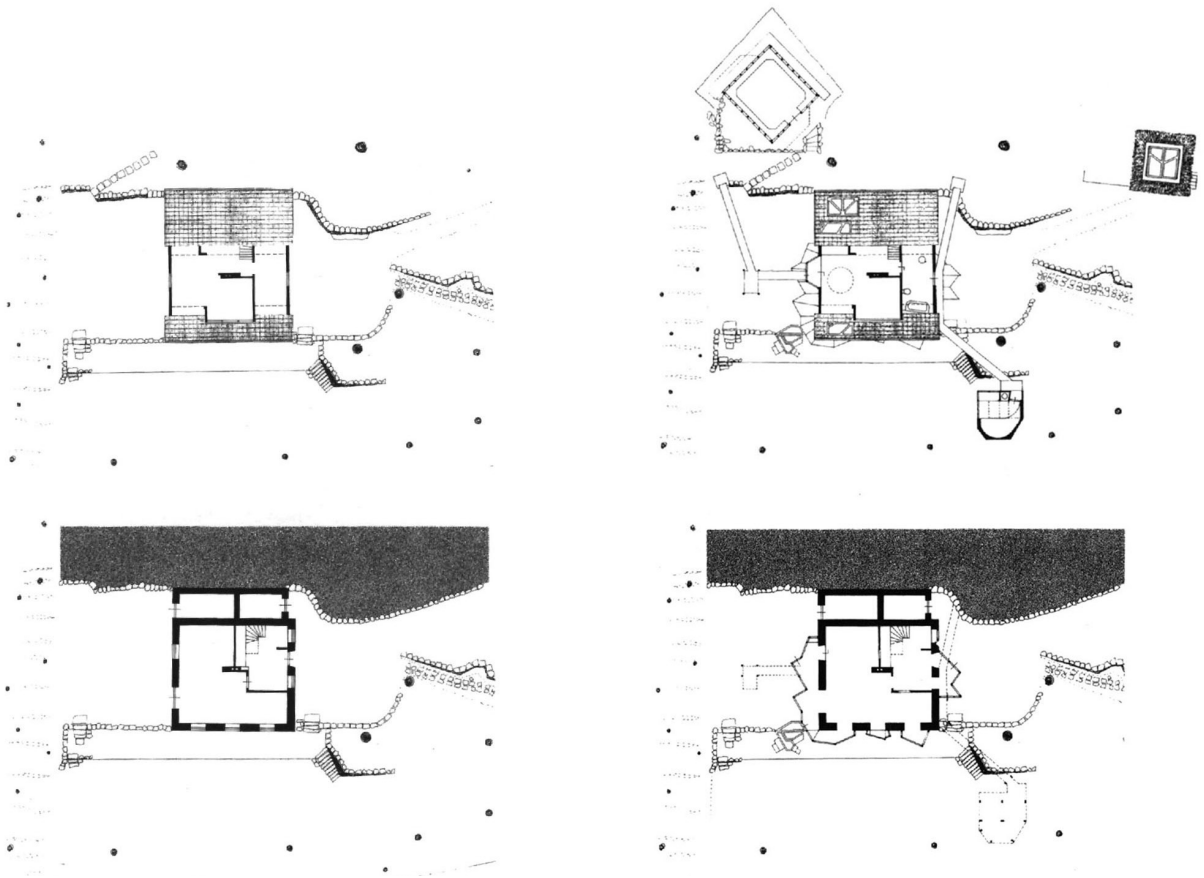


Figure 10a: Alison and Peter Smithson, Hexenhaus for Axel and Karliche, Bad Karlshafen (1986-2002), Initial and final state on ground and first floor. Van den Heuvel, Dirk and Max Risselada (2007)

started from the room and stopped halfway on an observation platform. The pavilion, with a square plan, was made with equidistant posts and beams and covered by a sloping glass plane that followed the descent of the meadow. Constituting an exceptional setting among the trees, its radical openness contrasts with the framed fragments from which the Hexenhaus could be experienced.

The architects had radically reversed the relationship of the house with the surrounding forest: "from an introverted house with thick walls, the Hexenhaus became an extension of the forest, and the forest, another space of the house" (Bach, 2020, para. 7). Although the original structure of the house is perfectly recognizable, the house was transformed through these small interventions until completely modifying its functioning. Its new porches and verandas, extended windows towards the exterior, inclusion of new pathways, bridges, walkways, viewpoints, sheds, and pavilions are the result of their reflections on the intermediate space. Together, we perceive the imprint of Kahn and his "shed" that captures the empty air. The echo of Lewerentz also resonates in the use of layers: layers formed by the trees of the forest, others by the constructed trees that make up the house.

If all facades are, as they were, generated by the nature of the intermediate space, then the roof must respond to the change that it generates in the sky (...) For example, in the Hexenhaus, the burden that the intermediate space transfers to the sky comes from the confinement of tree branches that surround and completely cover the house (Smithson and Smithson, 2001, p. 40-41).





Figure 10b: Initial porch expanded southwest / View of the Hexebesenraum and its reflection in the expanded porch. Van den Heuvel, Dirk y Max Risselada (2007)



Figure 11: Looking in, looking out: Janus thoughts for Siena (Soraya Smithson, 1984). Smithson & Smithson (2001)

## 5. Conclusions

### The “space between” as a response to the specific

As Alison explained in relation to the first porch, they built for the Hexenhaus, which served as the basis for the rest of the interventions they developed in the house, a new layer of air, an intermediate space, had been generated, starting from the precise knowledge of the inhabitants and the search for their connection to a specific place:

The architecture of this small porch arose from paying attention to a man and his cat. The porch can be seen as an example of a method by which a small physical change, a layer of air attached to an existing factory, can provoke a delicate tuning of the relationship between people and place (Smithson, 2001, p. 552).

In January 1984, Soraya Smithson, the youngest daughter of the architects, photographed her father as Janus, the mythological god of the threshold, to represent the ambiguity between the inside and the outside, “the gaze inward and the gaze outward” (Figure 11). Although taken to symbolize the new section they offered for the old Santa Maria of the Scala hospital in Siena, with one facade facing the countryside and another facing the city, the image seems ideal to synthesize the concept of an intermediate space, as an ambivalent place where

opposing tendencies find balance and which also corresponds to the ambivalent nature of man.

Reflecting on boundaries, dissolving them, giving them thickness, working their nuances, capturing with them the air, the void, and generating a space that allows living, looking inward and outward - as Peter’s photograph indicates - in the same way that man “breathes in and out” as Aldo van Eyck would affirm (in Ligtelijn and Strauven, 2008, p. 202).

The Smithsons’ reflections on this intermediate space, which is both inside and outside at the same time, aroused the interest of many other architects at the time, and still does. While the relevance of their thinking would be the subject of another study, it is worth noting that their influence is evident in the ambivalent interstitial spaces that we can observe in the work of Enric Miralles, Steven Holl, Toyo Ito, Sou Fujimoto, Álvaro Siza, or Lacaton and Vassal, to name a few. Their goal of humanizing architecture has also had numerous followers, and even today, it should serve as a reason for reflection.



Through the void, the sky, the strata, lattices and the trees, we observe how the space between enriched the architecture of the Smithsons to attend to each person and each place precisely, and thus, as they pursued from their early reflections, offer responses to the specific:

"What we try to offer is an urbanism where the specific emerges from the 'space between' and the projects, therefore, must be seen in the light of this ambition" (Smithson and Smithson, 2005, p. 12).

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