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### **Vetri. Yung Ho Chang Atelier FCJZ Vertical Glass House**

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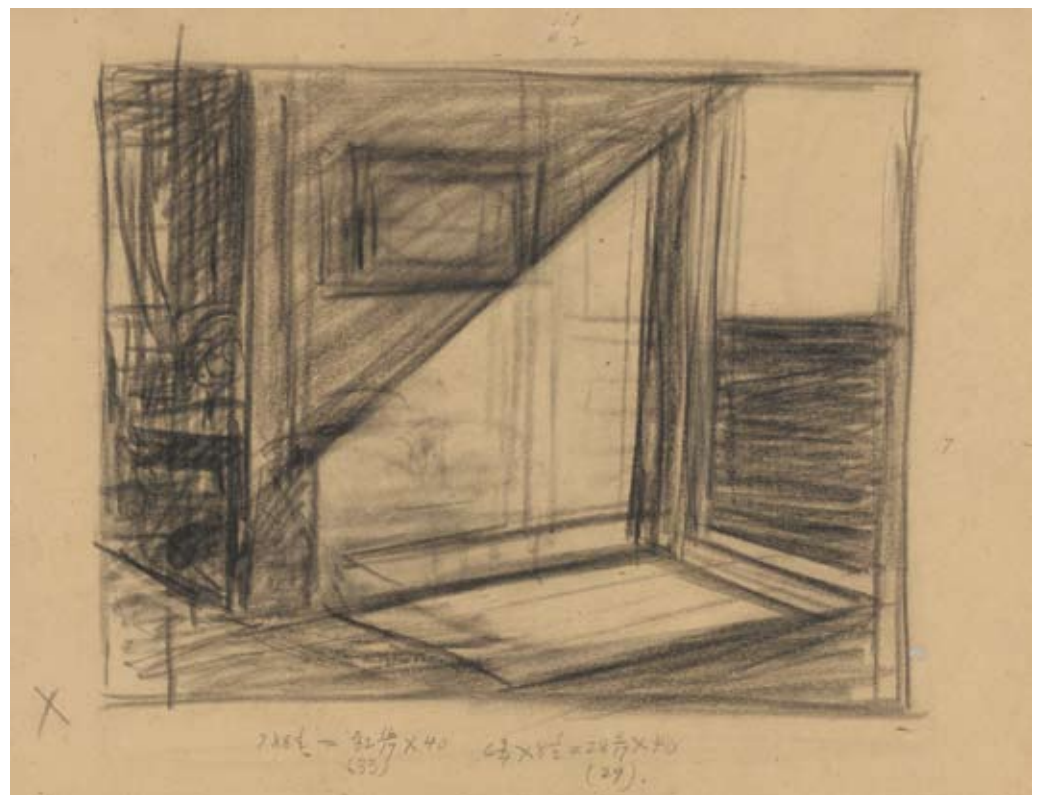
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# FIRENZE architettura

1&2.2014



Periodico semestrale  
Anno XVIII n.1&2  
Euro 7  
Spedizione in abbonamento postale 70% Firenze

## luce e materia

In copertina:  
Edward Hopper,  
Tow studies for Rooms by the Sea (recto), 1951  
Carboncino su carta  
Katharine Ordway Fund  
2008.144.1  
Photo Credit: Yale University Art Gallery



UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
FIRENZE

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**FIRENZE**  
**architettura**

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# FIRENZE architettura

1&2.2014

editoriale	Light is much more Alberto Campo Baeza	2
percorsi	James Turrell This must be the place: il Roden Crater Agostino De Rosa	12
luce e materia	La costruzione di nuove chiese e il tema della luce naturale Massimiliano Bernardini	20
	Mangiarotti Morassutti Favini Il restauro della Chiesa di Baranzate Giulio Barazzetta	24
	Studio TAMassociati Le stanze del silenzio Raul Pantaleo	34
	João Luís Carrilho da Graça Una palpitante bellezza Fabiola Gorgeri	42
	Yung Ho Chang Atelier FCJZ - Vertical Glass House Vetri Fabrizio Arrigoni	54
ricerche	Kengo Kuma: Risarcire i luoghi attraverso vedute e trasparenze Andrea Volpe	62
	Miti di luce effimera Alberto Pireddu	72
	L'Arte dell'Architettura - La Scuola di Luciano Semerani Antonio Monestiroli	82
atlante dida	Laura Andreini - Archea Luce, Materia, Architettura Laura Andreini	90
	MDU Architetti Luce e materia Marcello Marchesini	98
	Maria Grazia Eccheli Riccardo Campagnola Riverbero tra i canneti	106
eredità del passato	Lo spazio <i>gonfiante</i> del Mercato dei Fiori di Pescia una interpretazione Fabio Fabbrizzi	110
	Danteum la luce si fa corpo Francesco Collotti	118
	Dichtung und Wahrheit. Scarpa a Castelvecchio: l'invenzione della luce Riccardo Campagnola	128
eventi	Angiolo Mazzoni in Toscana Mostra itinerante Giulio Basili	140
	Galleria dell'architettura italiana Monestiroli Architetti Associati. Aule Salvatore Zocco	146
	Forlì, Musei San Domenico Liberty - Uno stile per l'Italia moderna Fabio Fabbrizzi	150
	Venezia 2014 Due passi e un salto alla Biennale Architettura Michelangelo Pivetta	154
	Roma, Accademia Nazionale di San Luca Eur sconosciuta Andrea Volpe	158
letture a cura di:	Giuseppina Farina, Martina Landsberger, Fabrizio Arrigoni, Ulisse Tramonti, Riccardo Renzi, Ugo Rossi, Mirko Russo, Ezio Godoli, Silvia Mantovani	162
english text		166

# Yung Ho Chang Atelier FCJZ Vertical Glass House

## Vetri

Fabrizio Arrigoni

*Man weiß noch nicht, wie ein Saal wirkt, der nur vom lichtdurchlassenden Fußboden aus beleuchtet wird. Man könnte da auf dem Lichte gehen. Derartiges und vieles Andre müßte ausprobiert werden.<sup>1</sup>*

Paul Scheerbarth, *Glasarchitektur*

La *Vertical Glass House* è un prototipo di alloggio urbano disegnato nel 1991 da Yung Ho Chang in occasione dell'annuale Shinkenchi Residential Design Competition organizzato dal Japan Architect Magazine. Il progetto fu insignito della Honorable Mention ma solo ventidue anni dopo, nel 2013, quell'iniziale ipotiposi, debitamente riconsiderata dall'Atelier FCJZ, ha trovato la via della costruzione, divenendo uno dei padiglioni permanenti della West Bund Biennial of Architecture and Contemporary Art di Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> L'impronta planimetrica del padiglione è basata su un quadrato di lato 6.60 m. con una area utile a piano minore di 40 m.<sup>2</sup> la sezione verticale è ripartita secondo tre livelli ai quali si aggiunge il basamento interrato alla quota di -2.10 m. Spiccato alla quota + 70 cm. dal ciglio del selciato, il ritmo dei quattro moduli è di 3.20 m. con il vano ultimo a doppia altezza. Le cortine murarie in cemento armato sono state gettate con casseri le cui paratie hanno consentito di ottenere, pur nella medesima consistenza materica, una dicotomia perfetta nell'aspetto delle superfici: frante, scabre e irregolari all'esterno quanto continue e prive di accidenti all'interno. A contrasto di tale *gravitas* i solai sono realizzati con lastre composite di vetro temperato dello spessore di 7 cm., comprese quelle disposte in copertura; queste sottili lame quando intercettano le pareti a settentrione e meridione ne fessurano il

manto determinando finestrate a nastro fortemente ribassate - 20x290 cm. - per poi proseguire in leggero aggetto oltre il limite della facciate stessa. Nella direzione opposta la compattezza della muraglia è del tutto salvaguardata con il ritmo della compartizione percepibile all'istante tramite le sincopi e le sfasature presenti nella trama delle casseformi lignee.<sup>3</sup> Il vuoto dell'edificio è organizzato e sostenuto attraverso un pilastro quadrato d'acciaio brunito posto nel punto di centro; da esso una croce di travi sempre in acciaio compartiscono la geometria di base in quattro quartieri, uno dei quali occupato dalla scala circolare. Una ridotta famiglia di oggetti - i sanitari, gli arredi del living e della cucina - allestiscono un calibratissimo paesaggio oltre che fissare laconicamente la distribuzione funzionale della casa: «all the furniture were designed specifically for the rooms inside the Vertical Glass House to be true to the original design concept and keep a coherence appearance with its structures and stairs. Air conditioning was added to the house».<sup>4</sup> Il telaio descritto oltrepassa la sua ragione tecnica divenendo l'agente capace di offrire ancoraggio, struttura e spinta verticale all'insieme; una conferma esplicita di tale ruolo ordinatore è il suo insistere nella zona apicale della fabbrica allorquando, smarrita ogni urgenza statica, diviene manifesta la sua azione segnica - *Wink* - e concettuale. «È curioso come l'albero abbia dominato la realtà occidentale e tutto il pensiero occidentale, dalla botanica alla biologia, l'anatomia, ma anche la gnoseologia, la teologia, l'ontologia, tutta la filosofia [...]: il fondamento-radice, Grund, roots e foundations». Questa nota espunta da *Mille plateaux*<sup>5</sup> introduce un tema che risulta essere di grande intesse nella de-

Vertical Glass House  
Xuhui District Longteng Road  
Shanghai, China  
1991-2013

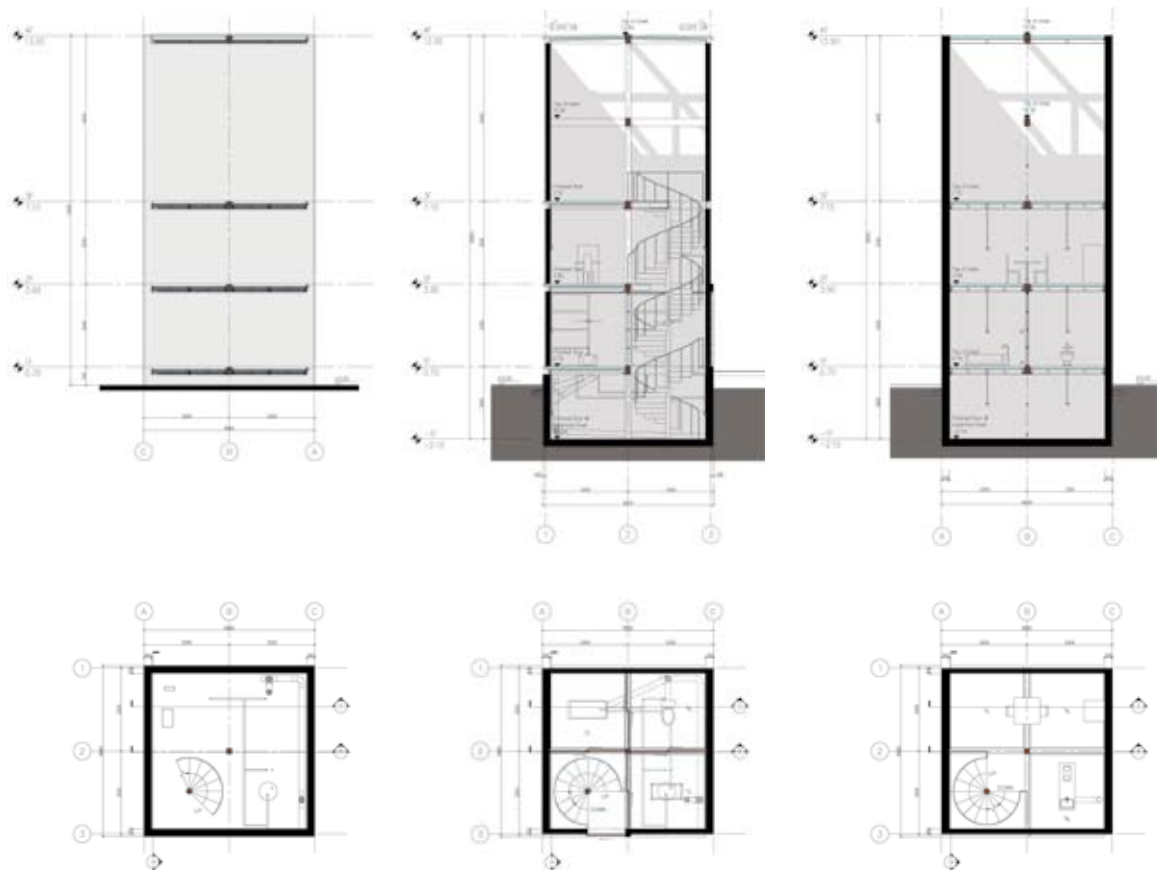
*Client:*  
West Bund

*Office:*  
Atelier FCJZ  
*Principal Architect:*  
Yung Ho Chang  
*Project Architect:*  
Lu Bai  
*Project Team:*  
Li Xiang Ting, Cai Feng

*Building Area:*  
170 m<sup>2</sup>

*Type:*  
Housing/Exhibition  
*Photographs:*  
courtesy Atelier FCJZ





2

cifrazione dell'opera; se *punctum crucis* di quest'ultima può essere individuato nel rapporto, perentorio quanto incisivo, che essa allestisce tra suo abito corporeo e luce naturale, tuttavia tale luogo sorgivo del disegno occorre perimetrarlo nei confini più vasti di un dialogo - e di un confronto - tra motivi occidentali e orientali.<sup>6</sup> Una propensione allo scambio e all'incrocio dei temi e delle attitudini testimoniata, in prima istanza, dalla biografia stessa dell'autore - e ciò senza volere costringere in una corrispondenza univoca la vita e l'opera. Yung Ho Chang, nato a Pechino nel 1956, conclusi i suoi studi (Master's Degree of Architecture presso l'Università della California a Berkeley) ha insegnato per oltre una decade negli Stati Uniti prima di tornare in patria e aprire con Lu Lijia, nel 1993, l'Atelier FCJZ (Fei Chang Jian Zhu),<sup>7</sup> primo studio indipendente del paese; tra il 2005 e il 2010 è stato a capo del Department of Architecture al MIT di Cambridge e parallela all'attività di docenza, costante è stato l'impegno di conferenziere, analogo di un antico "con-

sigliere itinerante" *You shi*: Yale, Princeton, Cornell, SCI-Arc, Penn, Berkeley, Berlage Institute di Rotterdam, Chinese University di Hong Kong, Hong Kong University e Tunghai University, Taiwan. È in tale *métissage* di contesti, esperienze e contributi critici che l'atelier ha tratteggiato gradualmente la propria fisionomia e le proprie tipologie di intervento: «in the past fifteen years, we have developed a body of work that ranges from interior design, building design, urban design, master planning, to art installation. In the process, our trajectory does go beyond a basic agenda from time to time, and ventures into the realms of culture, ecology, economy, and social/urban issues. This exhibition tries to map the development of FCJZ comprehensively and also includes a retrospective glimpse into some of the more hermetic design research I did prior to returning to China in order to establish the evolution of certain recurring ideas in our work».<sup>8</sup> La VGH è caso studio esemplare nel suo porsi come campione di ricerca e sperimentazione e dunque

*exemplum* del tutto separato sia dalla produzione edilizia corrente - incardinata al dato quantitativo, alla rendita finanziaria e alla velocità di esecuzione - sia dalle strategie riferibili agli uffici-vettori della globalizzazione socio-economica - con la loro subaltermità congenita alla *novitas* e lo spasmo compulsivo nell'imporre il segno *ab-solutus* e dissonante, cifra dell'*Iconic Building*: «I believe architecture is something more down to earth, and ultimately relates to how people live. Although I've done my share in some way, I don't think architects can just fly around and build structures anywhere, but rather they need to anchor themselves in one place. For example, you say Italian architects can still be the Marco Polos of today, and come to Beijing and stay for a year... and then there are actually Italian architects here, working and so on... but I'm suspicious of global practice. They may produce a very glorious kind of architecture, but it's not architecture that would belong somewhere. That being said, I think jet setters is very much a



3

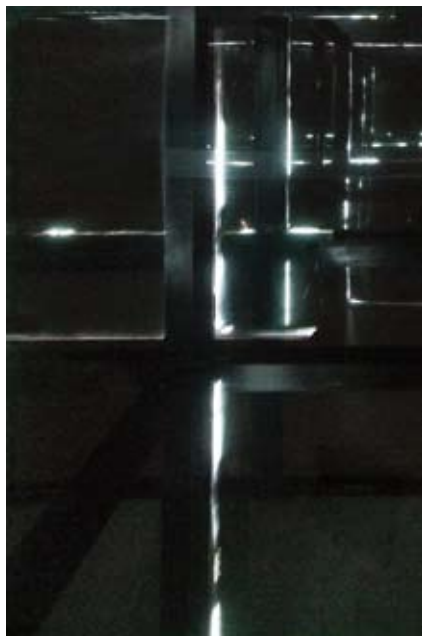
result of evolution. When I was younger, I remember I was so envious seeing the stars of my days talking about doing little sketches on their flights between locations, and that was the time for the architect to be creative. Now I would say what a lousy idea. You should really sit in your studio and work with materials and with your team».<sup>9</sup>

*Wen-hua* è termine cinese che vale l'endiadi "cultura-trasformazione" e che può essere accostato-dipanato alla fatica della traduzione vale a dire alla «trasposizione di una lingua nell'altra mediante una continuità di trasformazioni. Spazi continui di trasformazione, non astratte religioni di eguaglianza e di somiglianza, misura la traduzione».<sup>10</sup> Un campo semantico che possiamo associare a VGH e al suo aver origine in una segnatura storica del Moderno stesso; sono gli stessi autori a sottolineare questa provenienza, questa linea genealogica, ma al contempo tale debito è come riscattato dalle alterazioni e dagli scuotimenti, dalle metamorfosi e dai sommovimenti, cui viene con risolutezza

sottoposta: «[the house] discusses the notion of transparency in verticality while serving as a critic of Modernist transparency in horizontality or a glass house that always opens to landscape and provides no privacy. While turning the classic glass house 90 degrees, Vertical Glass House is on one hand spiritual: With enclosed walls and transparent floors as well as roof, the house opens to the sky and the earth, positions the inhabitant right in the middle, and creates a place for meditation».<sup>11</sup> Cancella le tracce!, *Verwisch die Spuren!*, è l'imperativo brechtiano adottato da Walter Benjamin.<sup>12</sup> La *Glaskultur* novecentesca è tecnica congenita al *Neue Zeit*, al tempo della barbarie e della miseria di esperienza («Nein, soviel ist klar: die Erfahrung ist im Kurse gefallen...») ed è primariamente un processo di smantellamento e riduzione dell'*intérieur* borghese, con la sua ovattata intimità (*Gemütlichkeit*), i suoi infiniti gusci protettivi (*Gehäuse*), le sue stanze ingombre di cose d'affezione e consuetudini, orme dei giorni terreni. Il vetro è virtù rivoluzionaria par excellence,

dissipa il "segreto" e indebolisce il possesso sino alla sua lenta estinzione e dove sorgono ostruzioni e opacità sostituisce passaggi, comunicazioni. Il vetro non ha aura, è algido, puro, privo di significazione, su di esso le vicende, gli accadimenti, scivolano, senza disseminare lasciti: «Glas ist nicht umsonst ein so hartes und glattes Material, an dem sich nichts festsetzt. Auch ein kaltes und nüchternes. Die Dinge aus Glas haben keine "Aura". Das Glas ist überhaupt der Feind des Geheimnisses. Es ist auch der Feind des Besitzes. Der große Dichter Andre Gide hat einmal gesagt: Jedes Ding, das ich besitzen will, wird mir undurchsichtig.» Sappiamo del sincero, quanto duraturo interesse del filosofo berlinese per Paul Scheerbar; e tuttavia le posizioni tra i due non coincidono. Se condiviso è il ripudio dell'universo guglielmiano e dell'umanesimo filisteo delle sue classi dominanti, la *Glasarchitektur* del Phantast produce e conserva tuttavia un rigenerato senso del rifugio, del raccoglimento - *Gespersterhafte Beleuchtung* -, un rinnovato equilibrio tra anima e suo





4



5

luogo,<sup>13</sup> la questione in gioco non è la liquidazione dell'interno per tramite di una profana e totale visibilità - Sichtbarkeit - quanto abbattere gli impedimenti che ostacolano o limitano lo spandersi della luce-colore «che tutto vuole abbracciare e ch'è viva nel cristallo». Il vetro - «organo dello spirito fantastico» - è l'agente alchemico di una trasfigurazione, di un trapasso, attraverso il quale si compirà «l'interiorizzazione dell'esterno» oltre ogni principio di trasparenza.<sup>14</sup> La casa di vetro è *locus amoenus*: una lanterna magica, una lucciola, un piccolo cosmo policromo fatto di iridescenze, di baluginii, di accensioni, secluso da ciò che l'attornia: «quando mi trovo nella mia sala di vetro, non voglio sentire né vedere niente del mondo esterno. Se ho nostalgia del cielo, delle nuvole, del bosco, posso benissimo uscire all'aperto...».<sup>15</sup>

VGH partecipa di questa vicenda, apportando un'inedita *Raumproblematik* rammemorante l'anti-funzionalismo fiabesco scheerbartiano, il simbolismo emancipativo della *Glasutopie* di Bruno Taut, l'elementarismo immanente di Adolf Benhe.<sup>16</sup> Le murature cieche impediscono ogni estroflessione ed ex-pressione lasciando che l'introspezione sia sporadicamente violata da vedute fortuite: salvaguardia di un *Leibraum* riservato e spoglio come il calcestruzzo levigato che l'avvolge sottraendolo al resto, allo spazio equi-valente della Großstadt.<sup>17</sup> Entrato al primo livello da un portone di ferro, l'ospite è immerso

in un "pozzo celeste", un cavo attraversato da relazioni fluttuanti tutte sul solo asse verticale. Una polarità che si dispiega nella giunzione-transizione tra terra e cielo, tra basso e alto, tra scuro e luminoso, tra chiuso e aperto, tra fisso e mobile, tra costante e cangiante: le tante specie dell'originario nesso tra fenomeno costruito - lineamenti e materie - e spazio uranico - aria e luce (di sole di luna di stella).

<sup>1</sup> «Attualmente non si sa ancora che effetto possa fare una sala illuminata soltanto da un pavimento che lascia filtrare la luce. In questo modo si potrebbe camminare sulla luce. Cose di questo genere e molte altre ancora andrebbero sperimentate.» Paul Scheerbart, *Glasarchitektur*, 1914 (trad. it. di M. Fabbri e G. Schiavoni, *Architettura di vetro*, Adelphi, Milano 1982, p. 101.)

<sup>2</sup> Cfr.: <http://www.westbundbiennial.com/> L'edificio è attualmente impiegato come residenza temporanea per artisti e architetti ospiti dell'istituzione.

<sup>3</sup> Da sottolineare come tale discontinuità nel trattamento delle forature sia confermata nell'assetto costruttivo della fabbrica dove le pareti intonse risultano di maggiore spessore rispetto alle due traforate. L'attenzione al dato artigianale e al costruito fisico ereditato dalla tradizione - un insieme denso di conoscenze, tecniche edificatorie e materie - è fatto che accomuna una generazione di nuovi progettisti cinesi: una sorta di recupero del binomio *Formlehre* e *Werklehre* che corroborava il *Bauen* bauhausiano. Su questi temi vedi i risultati delle due esposizioni: *Positions. Portrait of a New Generation of Chinese Architects*, a cura di F. Edelmann e F. Ged, Actar-D, Barcelona New York 2008; *From Research to Design. Selected Architects from Tongji University of Shanghai*, a cura di Xiangning Li, Triennale di Milano, 2012; cfr: <http://www.domusweb.it/content/domusweb/it/notizie/2012/09/11/dalla-ricerca-al-progetto.html>

<sup>4</sup> Yung Ho Chang / FCJZ, *Vertical Glass House Description*.

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1980, (trad. it. di G. Passerone, *Millepiani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia*, 27, Castelvecchi, Roma 2003).

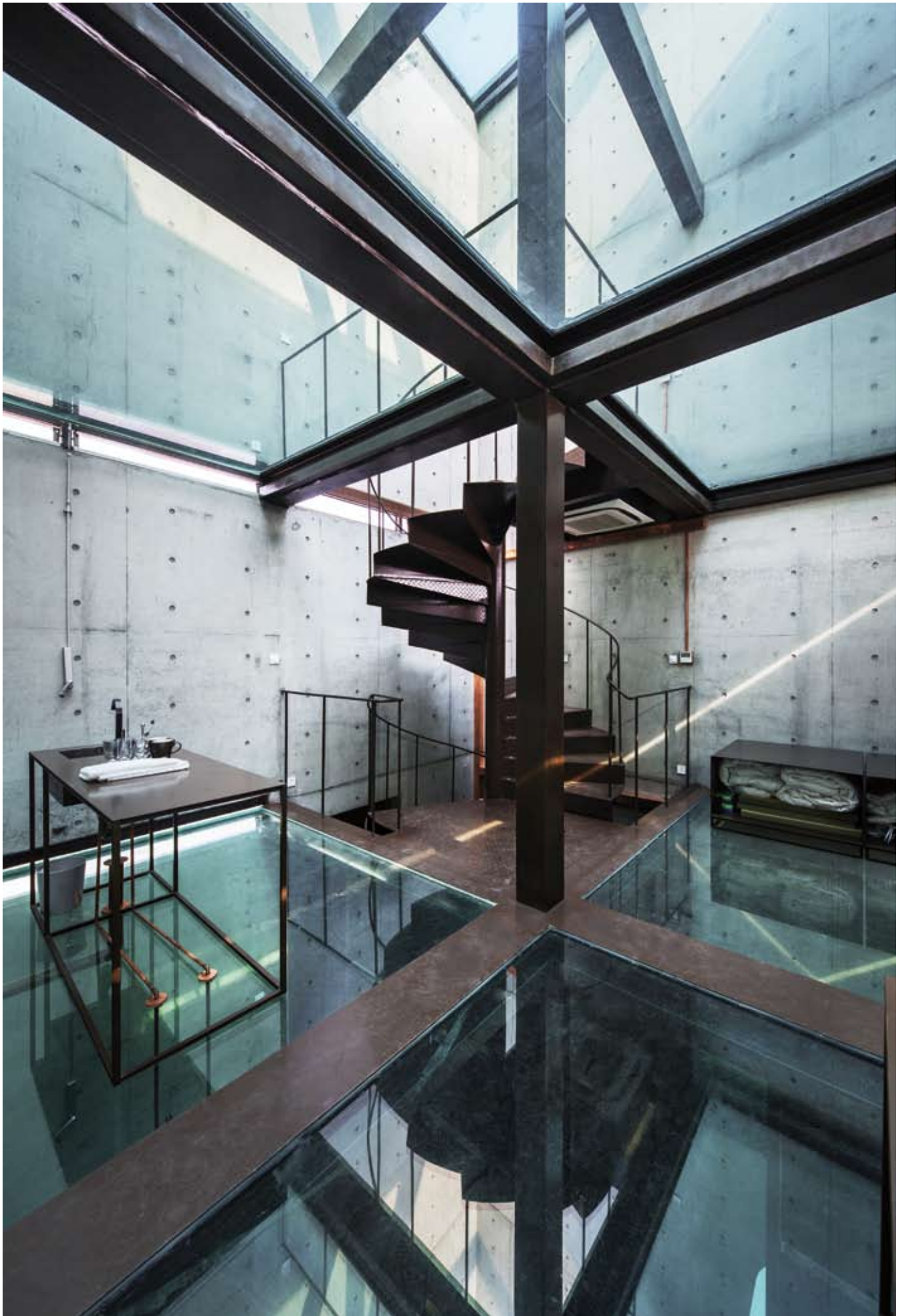
<sup>6</sup> Sulla legittimità di riconoscere una molteplicità irriducibile nel cuore della *Kultur* vale per queste pagine la premessa: «[...] la cultura non può esistere unicamente al singolare e la pluralità, lungi dal costituire

Pagine precedenti:

- 1  
*Interno*
- 2  
*Prospetto sud, sezioni A e C, piante basamento, piano primo, piano secondo*
- 3  
*Vista della casa da nord*
- 4  
*Interno notte*
- 5  
*Dettaglio della facciata*
- 6  
*Interno living*

Pagine successive:

- 7  
*Interno bagno*
- 8  
*Interno ultimo livello*



semplicemente una variazione, gli è consustanziale. Infatti, se da un lato vediamo le culture prendere in prestito l'una dall'altra, assimilare, fondersi in insieme più ampi, annullare le proprie specificità e infine uniformarsi, allo stesso tempo osserviamo anche la dinamica inversa, quella di una continua ri-specificazione e ri-individuazione. Esse continuano a subire un effetto di globalizzazione e, contestualmente, a ricostituirsi nella loro dimensione locale: la cultura è, infatti, sempre legata al contesto di appartenenza, a un "ambiente" diceva Nietzsche: rappresenta di fatto una questione eco-logica». François Jullien, *De l'universel, de l'uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, Fayard, Paris 2008 (trad. it. di B. Piccioli Fioroni e A. De Michele, *L'universale e il comune. Il dialogo tra culture*, Laterza, Roma Bari 2010; p. 154).

<sup>7</sup> Una sigla traducibile come architettura singolare, rara, non usuale.

<sup>8</sup> Yung Ho Chang, *Develop: The Architecture of Yung Ho Chang/Atelier FCJZ*, SA+P, MIT School of Architecture+Planning, February 15/April 13 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Interview with Yung Ho Chang of Atelier FCJZ* in "Design Boom", 25 settembre 2012. Una stanzialità che si specchia nella sede che accoglie l'atelier di Chang a Pechino, cfr.: Atelier Feichang Jianzhu, [http://www.chinese-architects.com/en/feichang/source:index\\_a\\_z/category:1/index:10/count:75](http://www.chinese-architects.com/en/feichang/source:index_a_z/category:1/index:10/count:75)

<sup>10</sup> «Die Übersetzung ist die Überführung der einen Sprache in die andere durch ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen. Kontinua der Verwandlung, nicht abstrakte Gleichheits- und Ähnlichkeitsbezirke durchmisst die Übersetzung.» Walter Benjamin, *Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, 1916 (trad. it. di R. Solmi, *Sulla lingua in generale e sulla lingua dell'uomo* in Id., *Angelus Novus*, Einaudi, Torino 1962; p. 64).

<sup>11</sup> Yung Ho Chang / FCJZ, *Vertical...* op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Erfahrung und Armut*, 1933 (trad. it. di M. Palma, *Esperienza e povertà*, in Id., *Scritti politici*, Editori Internazionali Riuniti, Roma 2011, pp. 253-260).

<sup>13</sup> Su questi temi cfr. Massimo Cacciari, *La catena di vetro* in Id., *Dallo Steinhof. Prospettive viennesi di primo Novecento*, Adelphi, Milano 1980, pp.125-129.

<sup>14</sup> Fabrizio Desideri, *Introduzione* in Paul Scheerbar, *Lesabéndio*, Edizioni Studio Tesi, Pordenone 1982, p. XII.

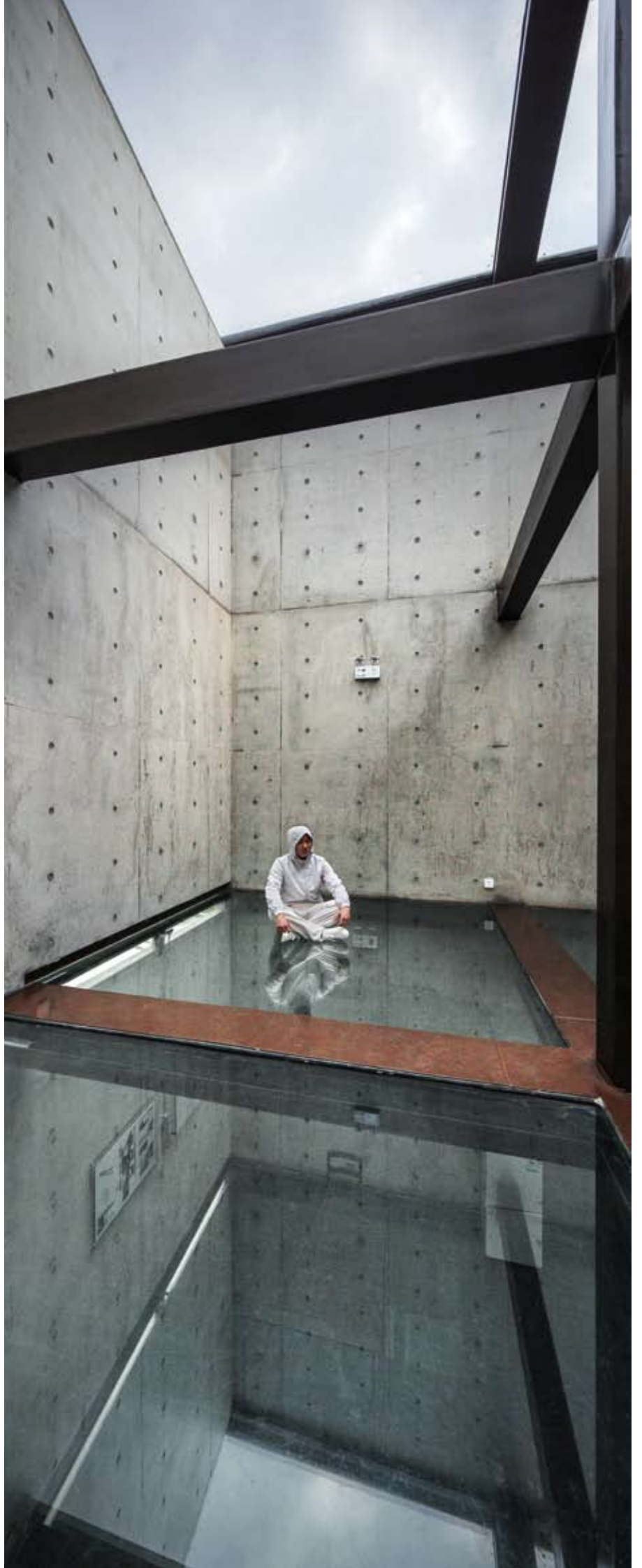
<sup>15</sup> Paul Scheerbar, *Glasarchitektur*, op. cit., p. 54. Una interpretazione che distingue il sentire dello scrittore gedanese dalla *Klarheit* del moderno in Rosmarie Haag Bletter, *The interpretation of the Glass Dream - Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor*, in "Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians", vol. 40, 1981, pp. 20-43.

<sup>16</sup> Adolf Behne, *Glasarchitektur Manifest*, in "Frühlicht", Heft 1, 1920.

<sup>17</sup> «Vertical transparency visually connects all the utilities, ductworks, furniture pieces on different levels, as well as the staircase, into a system of domesticity and provides another reading of the modern theory of "Architecture as living machine".» Yung Ho Chang / FCJZ, *Vertical...* op. cit. *La puro-visibilità* di impianti, reti, tubi di scarico, più che retorica o esplorazione del meccanico-tecnologico sembra essere un ribadito *Zeichen der Transparenz*.



7



# YungHoChangAtelierFCJZ-VerticalGlassHouse

Glass by Fabrizio Arrigoni

(page 54)



*“Man weiß noch nicht, wie ein Saal wirkt, denn nur vom Licht durchlassenden Fußboden aus beleuchtet wird. Man könnte da auf dem Lichte gehen. Derartiges und vieles Andre müßte ausprobiert werden.”<sup>1</sup>*

Paul Scheerbart, *Glasarchitektur*

The Vertical Glass House is a prototype of an urban dwelling designed by Yung Ho Chang for the annual Shinken-chiku Residential Design Competition organized by Japan Architect Magazine. The project was awarded an Honorable Mention, but only twenty-two years later, in 2013, was the initial hypothesis, duly reworked by Atelier FCJZ, actually built, becoming one of the permanent pavilions of the West Bund Biennial of Architecture and Contemporary Art in Shanghai.<sup>2</sup> The pavilion's footprint is based on a square, each side measuring 6.60 meters, with a usable space of 40 square meters per floor. The vertical section is divided into three levels, to which should be added a fourth level, a basement 2.10 meters underground. Set back 70 cm from the edge of the pavement, the four modules are each 3.20 meters high, with the top floor having a double-volume ceiling. The reinforced-concrete curtain walls were poured using formwork whose shuttering enabled the achievement of a perfect dichotomy in the surfaces, even though both sides are of the same material: scabrous and irregular on the exterior while perfectly smooth on the interior. Contrasting with this gravitas, the floor slabs and roof are all made of sheets of composite tempered glass 7 cm thick. On the north and south sides, these glass slabs cut through the concrete walls to form narrow ribbon-like windows - 20 x 290 cm - cantilevered to project slightly from the facades. On the other sides, the wall's compactness is fully preserved in the rhythm of the divisions, immediately perceptible in the breaks and mismatches in the pattern left by the wooden formwork.<sup>3</sup> The interior space is organized and supported by a square burnished steel post placed in the center; from it an intersection of steel beams divides the space geometrically into four quarters, one of which is occupied by the spiral staircase. A limited family of objects - the plumbing fixtures, living room furniture and kitchen fittings - furnish a carefully calibrated interior landscape as well as laconically determining the functional distribution of the house: "All the furniture were designed specifically for the rooms inside the Vertical Glass House to be true to the original design concept and keep a coherence appearance with its structures and stairs. Air conditioning was added to the house."<sup>4</sup> The framework just described goes beyond its technical *raison d'être* to become the agent capable of offering anchoring, structure, and vertical thrust to the whole; explicit confirmation of this organizing role is its persistence at the top of the building where, its static purpose already fulfilled, its action as a sign - Wink - and conceptual role become manifest.

"It is curious to see how the tree has dominated the reality of the West and all of Western thought, from botany to biology, anatomy, but also gnosiology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy... the taproot, *Grund*, roots and foundations." This note excerpted from *Mille plateaux*<sup>5</sup> introduces a topic that is of great interest for deciphering the work; if its *punctum crucis* can be identified as the relationship, as peremptory as it is incisive, which this sets up between the corporal shell and the natural light, nonetheless this wellspring of the design has to be traced out within the vaster confines of a dialogue - and a comparison - between Western and Eastern motifs.<sup>6</sup> It is a propensity towards exchange and intersection of themes and aptitudes evidenced, in the first place, by its designer's own life history - and this without attempting to force life and work into a direct, univocal corre-

spondence. Yung Ho Chang, born in Beijing in 1956, after finishing his studies (a master's degree in architecture from the University of California at Berkeley) taught in the United States for more than a decade before returning to China and opening, with Lu Lijia in 1993, the Atelier FCJZ (Fei Chang Jian Zhu),<sup>7</sup> the country's first independent architectural firm. From 2005 to 2010 he headed the Department of Architecture at MIT in Cambridge, and parallel with his teaching activities, he was a frequent lecturer, analogous to an ancient *You shi* itinerant counselor, at Yale, Princeton, Cornell, SCI.Arc, Penn, Berkeley, the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong University, and Tunghai University in Taiwan. It is in this *métissage* of contexts, experiences, and critical contributions that the firm has gradually delineated its own physiognomy and types of work: "In the past fifteen years, we have developed a body of work that ranged from interior design, building design, urban design, and master planning to art installation. In the process, our trajectory does go beyond a basic agenda from time to time, and ventures into the realms of culture, ecology, economy, and social/urban issues. This exhibition tries to map the development of FCJZ comprehensively and also includes a retrospective glimpse into some of the more hermetic design research I did prior to returning to China in order to establish the evolution of certain recurring ideas in our work."<sup>8</sup> The Vertical Glass House is an exemplary case study in the way it presents itself as a specimen of research and experimentation and thus an exemplum far removed from current building production - centered around quantity, financial return and speed of completion - and from the strategies emanating from the offices that are vectors of social and economic globalization, with their congenial submissiveness to *novitas* and compulsion to impose an *ab-solutus*, dissonant mark on the landscape typical of the "iconic building": "I believe architecture is something more down to earth, and ultimately relates to how people live. Although I've done my share in some way, I don't think architects can just fly around and build structures anywhere, but rather they need to anchor themselves in one place. For example, you say Italian architects can still be the Marco Polos of today, and come to Beijing and stay for a year... and then there are actually Italian architects here, working and so on... but I'm suspicious of global practice. They may produce a very glorious kind of architecture, but it's not architecture that would belong somewhere. That being said, I think jet setters is very much a result of evolution. When I was younger, I remember I was so envious seeing the stars of my days talking about doing little sketches on their flights between locations, and that was the time for the architect to be creative. Now I would say what a lousy idea. You should really sit in your studio and work with materials and with your team."<sup>9</sup> *Wen-hu* is the Chinese term which expresses the pair "culture-transformation" and can be associated/developed with the effort of translation, that is to say of the "transposition of one language into another by means of a continuity of transformations. Continuous spaces of transformation, not abstract religions of equality and resemblance, are the measure of translation."<sup>10</sup> This is a semantic field which we can associate with the Vertical Glass House and the fact of its originating in a *historic signature* of Modernism itself; the designers themselves stress this place of origin, this genealogy, but at the same time the debt is redeemed, as it were, by the alterations and displacements, the metamorphoses and upheavals, to which it is deliberately subjected: "[the house] discusses the notion of transparency in verticality while serving as a critic of Modernist transparency in horizontality or a glass house that always opens to landscape and provides no privacy. While turning the classic glass house 90 degrees, Vertical Glass House is on one hand spiritual: With enclosed walls and transparent floors as well as roof, the house opens to the sky and the earth, positions the inhabitant right in the middle, and creates a place for meditation."<sup>11</sup> Erase the traces! *Verwisch die Spuren!* is Brecht's imperative adopted by Walter Benjamin.<sup>12</sup> Twentieth-century *Glaskultur* is a technique congenial to the *Neue Zeit*, the time of barbarism and poverty of experience ("Nein, soviel ist klar: die Erfahrung ist im Kurse gefallen...") and is primarily a process of dismantling and reducing the bourgeois *intérieur*, with its cozy intimacy (*Gemütlichkeit*), its countless protective shells (*Gehäuse*), its rooms crammed with things reflecting affections and habits, footprints of days on earth. Glass is a revolutionary virtue par excellence; it dissipates the "secret" and weakens possession until it slowly fades into oblivion, and where obstructions and opacity arise it replaces them with passages and communication. "Glass has no aura; it is cold, pure, devoid of meaning. Over it slide events and happenings without leaving a trace: "Glas ist nicht umsonst ein so hartes und glattes Material, an dem sich nichts festsetzt. Auch ein kaltes und nüchternes. Die Dinge aus Glas haben keine 'Aura'. Das Glas ist überhaupt der Feind des Geheimnisses. Es ist auch der Feind des Besitzes. Der große Dichter Andre Gide hat einmal gesagt: Jedes Ding, das ich besitzen will, wird mir undurchsichtig." We know about Benjamin's sincere and enduring interest in Paul Scheerbart; and yet their positions do not coincide. While they may share their repudiation of the Wilhelminian universe and Philistine humanism of the dominant classes, the *Glasarchitektur* of the Phantast nonetheless produces and preserves a regenerated sense of refuge, of drawing inwards - *Gespensterhafte Beleuchtung* - and a renewed balance between the soul and its place.<sup>13</sup> The issue at stake is not liquidation of the interior by means of a profane, total visibility - *Sichtbarkeit* - but of knocking down the barriers that

block or limit the expansion of light-color "which wants to embrace everything and lives in the sheet of glass." Glass - "organ of the fantastic spirit" - is the alchemical agent of a transfiguration, a passage, by means of which the "interiorization of the exterior" will be accomplished, beyond any principle of transparency.<sup>14</sup> The glass house is a *locus amoenus*, a magic lantern, a firefly, a small multicolored cosmos made up of iridescence, glimmers, flashes, secluded from what is around it: "When I am in my glass room, I do not want to hear or see anything of the outside world. If I miss the sky, the clouds, the woods, I can easily go outside..."<sup>15</sup> The Vertical Glass House participates in this experience, contributing an unprecedented *Raumproblematik* reminiscent of Scheerbar's fairy-tale anti-functionalism, the liberating symbolism of Bruno Taut, the immanent elementarism of Adolf Behne.<sup>16</sup> The blind walls prevent any extroversion or pressure outwards, letting introspection be sporadically violated by fortuitous views: safeguarding a *Leibraum* as reserved and spare as the polished concrete that envelops it, subtracting it from everything else, the equi-valent space of the Großstadt.<sup>17</sup> Entering the first level through an iron door, the guest is immersed in a "heavenly well," a pit traversed by relations all fluctuating solely on the vertical axis. It is a polarity that operates in the junction-transition between earth and sky, low and high, dark and light, closed and open, fixed and mobile, constant and changing: the many species of the original nexus between the built phenomenon - lines and materials - and celestial space - air and light (of the sun, the moon, the stars).

Translation by Susan Scott

<sup>14</sup> "At the moment, we do not yet know what effect a room illuminated only by a floor that lets the light through will have. With this, one could walk on the light. Things like this and many others too should be experimented." Paul Scheerbar, *Glasarchitektur*, 1914 (translated here from the Italian edition by M. Fabbri and G. Schiavoni, *Architettura di vetro*, Milan, Adelphi, 1982, p. 101.)

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.westbundbiennial.com>. The building is currently used as a temporary residence for artists and architects who are guests of the institution.

<sup>16</sup> It should be emphasized that this difference in treatment of the openings is echoed in the building's structure, where the walls left solid are thicker than those pierced by windows. The attention to the actual making and the physical construction inherited from the tradition - a dense sum of knowledge, building techniques, and material skills - is an aspect shared by a new generation of Chinese architects, a sort of recovery of the paired terms *Formlehre* and *Werklehre* that underpinned the Bauhaus *Bauen*. In this regard, see the results of two exhibitions: *Positions. Portrait of a New Generation of Chinese Architects*, curated by F. Edelmann and F. Ged, Barcelona - New York, Actar-D, 2008; *From Research to Design. Selected Architects from Tongji University of Shanghai*, curated by Xiangning Li, Triennale di Milano, 2012; see also <http://www.domusweb.it/content/domusweb/it/notizie/2012/09/11/dalla-ricerca-al-progetto.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Yung Ho Chang / FCJZ, *Vertical Glass House Description*.

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1980, (here translated from the Italian edition by G. Passerone, *Millepiani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia*, 27, Rome, Castelvecchi, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> On the legitimacy of recognizing an irreducible multiplicity at the heart of the *Kultur*, the following premise is valid here: "Culture cannot exist solely in the singular, and plurality, far from being merely a variant of it, is consubstantial with it. For if on one hand we see cultures borrowing from each other, assimilating, melding into something larger, canceling out their specific traits and becoming uniform, at the same time we observe also the inverse dynamic, that of a continuous re-specification and re-individualization. They continue to undergo an effect of globalization, and at the same time to reshape themselves into their local dimension; because culture is always tied to its native context, to an "environment," as Nietzsche would say: it is by its very nature an ecological matter." François Jullien, *De l'universel, de l'uniforme, du commun et du dialogue entre les cultures*, Paris, Fayard, 2008 (here translated from the Italian edition by B. Piccoli Fioroni and A. De Michele, *L'universale e il comune. Il dialogo tra culture*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2010; p. 154).

<sup>20</sup> The initials can be translated as meaning a unique, rare, unusual architecture.

<sup>21</sup> Yung Ho Chang, *Develop: The Architecture of Yung Ho Chang/Atelier FCJZ*, SA+P, MIT School of Architecture+Planning, February 15-April 13 2007.

<sup>22</sup> "Interview with Yung Ho Chang of Atelier FCJZ" in *Design Boom*, 25 September 2012. This stability is reflected in the quarters of Chang's firm in Beijing, in *Atelier Feichang Jianzhu*, [http://www.chinese-architects.com/en/feichang/source:index\\_a\\_z/category:1/index:10/count:75](http://www.chinese-architects.com/en/feichang/source:index_a_z/category:1/index:10/count:75).

<sup>23</sup> "Die Übersetzung ist die Überführung der einen Sprache in die andere durch ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen. Kontinua der Verwandlung, nicht abstrakte Gleichheits- und Ähnlichkeitsbezirke durchmisst die Übersetzung." Walter Benjamin, *Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen*, 1916 (translated into Italian by R. Solmi, "Sulla lingua in generale e sulla lingua dell'uomo," in *Angelus Novus*, Turin, Einaudi, 1962, p. 64).

<sup>24</sup> Yung Ho Chang / FCJZ, *Vertical...* op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Erfahrung und Armut*, 1933 (Italian translation by M. Palma, "Esperienza e povertà," in *Scritti politici*, Rome, Editori Internazionali Riuniti, 2011, pp. 253-260).

<sup>26</sup> On these questions see Massimo Cacciari, "La catena di vetro," in *Dallo Steinhof. Prospettive viennesi di primo Novecento*, Milan, Adelphi, 1980, pp. 125-129.

<sup>27</sup> Fabrizio Desideri, introduction to Paul Scheerbar, *Lesabéndio*, Pordenone, Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1982, p. XII.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Scheerbar, *Glasarchitektur*, op. cit., p. 54. An interpretation that distinguishes the feeling of the Polish writer from the Klarheit of the modern in Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "The Interpretation of the Glass Dream - Expressionist Architecture and the History of the Crystal Metaphor," in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 40, 1981, pp. 20-43.

<sup>29</sup> Adolf Behne, "Glasarchitektur Manifest," in *Frühlicht*, Heft 1, 1920.

<sup>30</sup> "Vertical transparency visually connects all the utilities, ductworks, furniture pieces on different levels, as well as the staircase, into a system of domesticity and provides another reading of the modern theory of 'Architecture as living machine,'" Yung Ho Chang / FCJZ, *Vertical...* op. cit. The pure-visibility

of the plumbing and electrical systems, drains, etc., more than being rhetoric or an exploration of the mechanical-technological aspect, seems to be a reiterated *Zeichen der Transparenz*.

## Kengo Kuma: Recovering places through transparency and frames by Andrea Volpe

(page 62)



"Do not study what the ancient masters did, but what they sought". With this quote taken from Basho's celebrated 17th century travelogue *Oku no hosomichi*,<sup>1</sup> Bruno Taut<sup>2</sup> summed up his ideas on Japanese modern architecture.

According to the German master, Japan was unable to develop its own personality in architecture for two main reasons: on one hand, there was the persistent legacy of the monumental style typical of the Meiji, Taishō and Shōwa eras; a redundant canon heavily influenced by western classicism and still used for all the new civic buildings of the Empire; on the other hand, there was the attitude of a fresh generation of enthusiast young Japanese architects who designed the expected white modernist buildings, totally indifferent both to the character of a site or to Japanese traditional building techniques and local climate conditions. Their naiveté led them to copy uncritically the latest architectural trends imported from Europe.

Bruno Taut's ability to understand that Japanese architects were conceiving their *ethos* only as a matter of style had been already exposed in his long reportage published in 1935 by "*L'architecture d'Aujourd'hui*".<sup>3</sup> In that piece, Taut's critical strategy was crystal clear. He simply could not talk about any new architecture built in the Land of the Rising Sun without setting the constituent parts of Japanese architecture in a precise relationship with the extraordinary modern values of its traditional practices, represented by the luminous example he saw just the day after his arrival in Japan<sup>4</sup> on his 53<sup>rd</sup> birthday; an unforgettable experience made possible through Isaburo Ueno's precious diplomatic work.

A series of broken phrases, quickly copied down by Taut in his diary, bear witness to the amazement he experienced during his notorious visit to Katsura Imperial Villa.

In the pure *sukiya* style of the 17<sup>th</sup> century palace, built in the western suburbs of Kyoto, Bruno Taut found not only a paradigmatic term of comparison he would always place in juxtaposition to modernist Japanese architecture, but a universal masterpiece of architecture itself, just like the other wonders he would visit a few months later in Mie prefecture: the wooden shrines of the Shinto sanctuary of Ise, which is rebuilt every 20 years as a part of the Shinto belief of the death and renewal of nature and the impermanence of all the things and as a way to pass building techniques from one generation to the next.

With his discovery of Katsura and Ise, Bruno Taut's new conceptual geography would be developed definitively around these two landmarks. Almost sixty years later the same path leading to Katsura would be followed by Kengo Kuma.

Kuma's body of architectural work is famously distinguished by the rhythmic use of natural light and shadows. This attitude mutated from the traditional themes of Japanese architecture and was literally rediscovered by Kuma after his early period "*architecture of fragmentation*" whose most iconic project, the M9 building built in Tokyo in 1991 and heavily influenced by a late postmodernist canon, is conceived as an inevitable reaction to the chaotic urban environment of the Japanese megalopolis.<sup>5</sup>

"The next important turning point for me came a few months later, when I was asked to design a guesthouse on a lot in Atami, which faced the Pacific Ocean. While I was walking around the premises, a neighbor approached me and told me that a famous architect designed his house. He invited me to drop by if I was interested. His home looked like an ordinary house from the outside, but when I set foot inside, I was truly amazed by the mysterious atmosphere that pervaded it: it was the Hyuga residence - also known as the Phantom House - designed by the German architect Bruno Taut."<sup>6</sup>

As the son of an art connoisseur and collector of the numerous objects designed by Taut in Japan, Kuma paradoxically could be considered one of the last heirs of the German master. After all, Kuma's personal design evolution

