

Solo House

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architect.*

*Text by the editors of
Project.*

Pezo von Ellrichshausen produces villas and pavilions, most of which can be classified into two types. The first could be called mass projects. The second could be called grid projects. (A third type, aggregate projects, is becoming apparent in the firm's work as well.) The mass projects tend to be arranged vertically. They are characterized by simple forms, often chamfered, and finished with monolithic or monochromatic surfaces that are punctured by irregularly spaced and sized openings. They are embedded in their sites. The result is architecture that appears as a solid, carved material. The grid projects tend to be arranged horizontally. They have rigid, symmetrical plans and expressed structural grids. They float above their sites. The result is architecture that appears as a series of planes and frames. There is a binary quality to these two types of images, and the processes that they suggest. One obscures its actual structure and reads as a solid object, the other expresses its actual structure and reads as a series of framed voids. One would seem to emerge from the processes of physical or digital modeling, the other the processes of orthographic or constructed drawing. In one type the diagram functions as a formal metaphor (the mass), in the other the diagram functions as a formal structure (the grid).

Pezo von Ellrichshausen produces a single axonometric section of each of its projects. The projects are shown isolated on the page as objects, with no reference to the site, reinforcing the notion of them as abstract, repetitive types. As a means of description of architecture, the technique seems incongruous with the mass projects, as it reveals little about their asymmetrical forms and irregular plans. The mass projects establish a set of specific relations between interior and exterior. They appear to be inflected by their contexts, engaged with the landscape, and therefore must be studied in the round in order for their differentiated forms to be comprehended. But the utility of the axonometric section is clear for the grid projects, as it communicates the continuity between structure and form. A single drawing is enough to give an indication of the entirety of both the interior and exterior of these biaxially symmetric objects. The grid projects appear as the pure results of formal systems. They float independently of any specific context, whether in the space of the drawing surface or the building site.

The Solo House is a grid project. It is a square courtyard house lifted off the ground. The void of the courtyard is extruded downwards as an apparently solid base, allowing the perimeter living areas to cantilever over the sloped terrain. The form of the building is therefore clearly separated from the surrounding site and it is resolved as a finite and complete system of structural elements. The house is a concrete grid, literally and conceptually: a perfect coincidence of plan, material, structure and appearance. The square swimming pool at the exact center of the courtyard complicates a simple formal interpretation of the house, creating a tension in the plan between the implicit

hierarchy of a 9-square grid and the even dispersal of a 16-square grid. This tension exists at the level of formal systems. The swimming pool is enclosed by the courtyard and open to the sky, reinforcing the autonomy of the spaces within the house from their context. The site does not inflect the form.

The mass and grid types are so consistent in Pezo von Ellrichshausen's work that they suggest something akin to the *ur*-diagram that Rudolf Wittkower argued was the common basis of Andrea Palladio's villas. Wittkower, however, discovered a common internal structure that could not easily be discerned from the outwardly different forms of Palladio's villas, provoking new methods of reading architecture. Unlike Palladio's villas, Pezo von Ellrichshausen's projects reveal themselves clearly. Their forms are the unadulterated images of their diagrams.

There is at first glance something refreshing in the simplicity of these projects, set against the spectacular ambitions of much recent architecture. But conceptually, Pezo von Ellrichshausen's work is not so far removed from the visual and formal excesses of some of the firm's peers. Whether based on the mass or the grid (or the aggregate), the literal expression of the diagram as image and form is common to the projects. The structure of the mass projects is obscured so that they look like masses. The structure of the grid projects is expressed so that they look like grids. These simultaneous and contrasting approaches to design distinguish Pezo von Ellrichshausen from previous producers of ideal villas—Palladio, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe—whose methods did not vary so diametrically from project to project, but whose projects could not be read so reductively because of the idiosyncrasies of their methods. Taken together, Pezo von Ellrichshausen's projects are more akin to Philip Johnson's pavilions in New Canaan, more Glass House than Farnsworth. They represent the repetition of a series of formal diagrams that are available for use by architects today, models of buildings that can be picked out of the image-sphere of contemporary architecture and reproduced anywhere. Pezo von Ellrichshausen's varied types do not represent austere, material alternatives to the image as the generator of contemporary architecture. These ideal villas affirm it.

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The Solo House takes its name from the Solo Houses development, a group of luxury villas in rural Catalonia commissioned from well-known young architects by developer Christian Bourdais. Pezo von Ellrichshausen's contribution is the first of the houses to be completed, and is referred to by the developers as Solo Pezo, highlighting the importance of the firm's identity to the branding of the development, which is a kind of Ordos light. Other projects represent other types pervasive in the works of their architects, suggesting that the literal construction of the formal diagram in Pezo von Ellrichshausen's work is a method of architectural production common in architecture today. No less than the exuberant output of the "starchitects" of an earlier generation, this formal repetition engenders a signature approach for each architect that is suited to the kinds of "curated" enclaves that have proliferated in recent years. (The pluralism of New Canaan again looms large, a free-market rejoinder to the socialist intimations of the all-white Weissenhof Estate.)