

House in Ginigala

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Text by the editors
of Project.

In his lecture “What is the Contemporary?,” Giorgio Agamben proposes, in reference to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*, that contemporariness is “a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it, and at the same time, keeps distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*.”¹ The richly restrained and referential House in Ginigala, Sri Lanka by Productora (a small firm based in Mexico City) suggests one potentially contemporary mode of architecture for this globalized present, with its multiplying centers and scarce dogmas.

Productora is among a group of architects who have embraced a reductive neo-rationalist aesthetic with an immediate lineage in the European avant-garde of the 1960s and ’70s. These architects favor repetitive orthogonal geometries over “digital” and other (expressive, performative, deconstructivist, etc.) idiosyncrasies and complexities of the recent past. Productora makes use of modernist

formal tropes, but those tropes are often stripped of their explicitly dialectical force. This operation results in something like a rigorous casualness, perhaps even irony, in its resuscitation of history. The firm

¹ Agamben, “*What is An Apparatus?*” and *Other Essays*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54.

appears to design primarily from persistent conventions of drawing—plan, section, axonometry, linear perspective—rather than within the freely manipulable space of three-dimensional modeling software. These techniques produce projects (often unbuilt) in which critical ideas are evident in the modes of drawing themselves, without necessary reference to the objects they describe. Yet the firm also works with an attention to perceptual and material effects specific to each project and most evident in models, renderings and built work. The works distort, surprise and seduce with applied patterns, perspectival manipulations and rich material palettes. In this regard, they slip between loosely defined camps: the relaxed, “cool” work of the American “practice generation”; and the “hotter,” more ideologically charged abstractions of their European peers.

The House in Ginigala, a recent project for a residence in rural Sri Lanka, makes these tangled ambitions evident in a seemingly unassuming house form. The project is at once formally autonomous and contextually specific, occupying an indeterminate position between a Western intellectual tradition—the discipline of architecture as canonized and institutionalized—and an expansive field of practice that produces situations (and architects) that cannot be contained by the progression of styles and narratives. The house encapsulates one of the primary tensions of contemporary architectural production: the need to confront the cultural context of a project on both a global and local scale. This is a self-critical position that demands an awareness of one’s knowledge *of* the field (the discipline) and unfamiliarity *in* the field (the site).

The house, split cleanly in section, follows a simple diagram of public space below and private space above. Divergent material and formal strategies are associated with each half. The isomorphic reinforced concrete grid of the lower floor contains an open-air composition of stepping and pinwheeling stairs and pools, either perfectly orthogonal or apsidal (with clear reference to elements of Mies van der Rohe’s houses in particular), which spill out from the rectangle established by the grid to engage the sloping terrain of the site. The upper floor consists of four symmetrically arranged bedrooms under a pitched roof. Here, light wood framing rests on the concrete below, while the walls of the bedrooms are set back to produce a continuous *loggia* at the perimeter. The “international” architecture below thus forms the base for the *piano nobile* of the “vernacular” house above, producing a project that is grounded in a language estranged from and yet embedded in its immediate context.

A critic so inclined could perform one of Colin Rowe’s Wittkowerian analyses of the project, discovering the traces of a Palladian villa in its form. At once, one could reveal the subtext of conventional vernacular construction, a rational structure in reinforced concrete that hosts a series of additive elements specific to the landscape and to the desired functions of living. What this project suggests is that today neither method of interpretation is sufficient. What is inside or outside of the discipline is never so clear; this architecture, like the intermingled cultures it operates within, is not reducible to one narrative or another. To engage with the discipline of architecture is always reflexive act, perhaps more so now than ever. These are architects who are insiders outside of themselves, their time and their place.